



# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent changes in higher education sector have resulted in an increasingly marketised and competitive environment. Fee changes have heightened student expectations, whilst neo-liberal approaches, such as the removal of the student number cap have intensified focus on the recruitment and retention of students. Consequently performance in a variety of league tables has become a primary area of concern for universities, both as a means of student attraction and also as a response to pressure from a range of stakeholders. It is against this backdrop, that this research considers the impact of performance management within the sector. It is through such mechanisms that institutions attempt to leverage improved efficiency, raise performance standards, and evidence achievement against a variety of benchmarks.

Despite the more taxonomical environment within higher education, the issue of performance management remains under researched. The aim of this research is therefore to illuminate the challenges and complexities faced by the three institutions in addressing and managing academic performance. Taking a case-study approach, the research rests on a conceptual framework that highlights the prominence of power, status, authority and ambiguity. The thesis argues that these concepts are undervalued within existing performance management debates, and contributes to the knowledge base within this area,

The research makes a number of key recommendations for policy and practice. It calls for greater recognition of the role of status within performance discussions, highlighting the potential for this to obfuscate performance management discussions. It challenges assumptions around the authority of line managers, and the extent to which this leads to managerial reluctance, and argues that existing literature has not adequately addressed issues of nuanced managerial responsibility within flatter organisational structures. It also challenges the view that academics lament the notion of performance management and provides evidence that many academics want an increased focus on performance as a means of achieving a greater sense of fairness and parity within their working environment.

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my loving wife, Eryl. So many wonderful things have happened to us during this three years, including our wedding and the arrival of our two beautiful children. Without your encouragement and support, I would never have embarked upon this journey, and the change in career that it has made possible. You have sacrificed, and continue to sacrifice a lot in order for me to do this, and I hope to continue to repay your faith in me.

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## **AUTHORS DECLARATION**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

The increasing marketization (Palfreyman and Tapper, 2014) and massification (British Council, 2014) of the higher education sector has presented a number of key challenges for universities. Recent prominent changes include the increase to student tuition fees in 2012, significantly impacting upon the HE landscape (Temple *et al.*, 2014) and the abolition of the student number cap, resulting in more intense competition (Hillman, 2014). Consequently, institutional concerns for league table position, and performance against numerous metrics, has led to renewed assertions that managerialism is rife within the sector (Decramer *et al.*, 2013; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Commentators had already suggested that the academic environment was becoming a taxonomical one (Townley, 1993; Waller, 2004; Martin and Sauvegeot, 2011), and given the aforementioned changes it is not unreasonable to assume that this trend will intensify

As an inevitable consequence of growing competition, coupled with cuts in funding and pressure from stakeholders to evidence value for money, it is argued that scrutiny of individual and departmental performance has grown and the use of performance management has intensified (Broadbent and Loughlin, 2007; Asif and Searcy, 2014). Unsurprisingly, the topic is an area of increasing academic and practitioner interest, particularly given the suggestion that an increase in the measurement and management of performance might present potential for episodes of conflict, in what has traditionally been a highly collegiate environment (Bennett, 2014).

This thesis therefore contributes to the body of knowledge within this contemporary discourse. It considers the extent to which performance management practices are

meaningfully enacted within academia and seeks to identify a number of factors which contribute to the complexity of performance management in higher education. Specifically, the thesis investigates the extent to which line managers (or those responsible for appraisal) have the authority and support from senior management to do so thoroughly. It explores the availability of evidence, and associated challenges of adequately measuring academic performance, and the role that status might play in constraining attempts to manage performance. Furthermore, it examines the extent to which episodes of conflict arise as a consequence of greater performance management, and finally seeks to establish perceptions around alternative or refined approaches to performance management, which might be more appropriate in a higher education setting.

The prescriptive literature makes a number of assumptions around performance management practices; not least, that performance can be easily measured and quantified. Whilst the critical literature addresses the multiplicity of purpose, and the various barriers to the successful use of systems such as appraisal (see for example: Newton and Findley, 1996; Prowse and Prowse, 2010; Chubb et al., 2011), a number of assumptions are made about authority, power and status which inevitably underpin these approaches. This research study highlights the potential for those in management positions to be reluctant to fulfil their performance management responsibilities, as a consequence of nuanced lines of authority and a lack of senior management support. Further issues such as the ambiguity of academic labour, the complexity of organisational structures, and prevailing notions of autonomy in the sector present a myriad of challenges when considering the applicability of traditional performance management practices within higher education; these issues are explored in depth within the study.

Conceptually, the thesis addresses the topic of performance management through an examination of what I have termed 'pillars of performance management'. These pillars are power, authority, status and ambiguity. The findings presented in this study suggest that the interplay between these pillars shapes the nature and impact of performance management within higher education, however they are understated in the extant literature. The thesis therefore makes a valuable addition to the theory of performance management, and has clear implications for policy and practice.

The study takes a phenomenological approach and uses a case study methodology involving three higher education institutions. Data is collected using semi-structured interviews from a variety of participants including what I have termed: 'academic managers', 'managed academics', trade union representatives and HR professionals. Data is analysed using a structured model of thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2008) to report the key themes captured. Finally, the research is concluded by providing a thorough account of the findings, implications for policy and practice and suggestions for further research.

The remainder of this chapter provides specific details in relation to the context of this research (section 1.1) the aims and objectives of the study (1.2) and the structure of the thesis (1.3). Section 1.4 provides a summary of the first chapter, before introducing the literature review.

## **1.1 Rationale and Background**

The increasingly managerialist approach to academic performance represents a substantial paradigm shift from traditional notions of autonomy and professional sovereignty which academic staff have cherished (Winter, 2009; Egginton, 2010). The marketization and massification (Chan, 2004; Palfreyman and Tapper, 2014; and

Giannakis, 2015) of the HE sector has led to an increasingly competitive environment both between and within institutions. It is against this backdrop that universities are required to evidence performance, through a number of league tables and KPI's. Specific attention is often paid to student satisfaction (NSS), performance in the research excellence framework (REF), and more recently, the teaching excellence framework (TEF), with performance in these areas often used for marketing and recruitment purposes, as well as a lens through which the performance of faculty, departments, and individuals can be considered. The sector is a heavily politicised one, particularly since the 2012 tuition fee increase, leading to a more consumerist approach from prospective students and an understandable rise in their expectations. Inevitably, as universities seek to evidence performance at institutional level, the scrutiny of academic staff within departments, schools and faculties has apparently increased.

The use of performance management tools, particularly the performance appraisal, is commonplace within the HE sector. However, the intensification of "management" represents a distinct cultural shift for many academics. Whitley (1989, p.211) defines management as "the construction, maintenance and improvement of an administrative system which co-ordinated and transformed human and material resources into productive services". The notion of management is widely debated throughout the literature (Penrose, 1980; Reed, 1984; Townley, 1993) and this study has adopted Whitley's conception. The extent to which academic managers are equipped to meet the challenge of management, particularly management of performance, will be examined in this research.

This thesis considers the complexity of performance management within a sector recognised for autonomy and collegiality (Waters, 1989) and one which has an

ambiguous labour process, prone to measurement issues (Broadbent, 2007). It seeks to examine the extent to which the rhetoric of performance management is realised within institutional settings, and considers the impact of performance management on relationships between academic colleagues. Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996) described the “Taylorisation” of the academic labour process some twenty years ago, given the rate of change within the HE context since that time, it is anticipated that this trend will have continued.

It is within this turbulent, often conflicted environment, that the research is located. The specific detail of the aims and objectives of the thesis will be described in the following section.

## **1.2 Research Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the phenomena of performance management within a higher education setting. The rationale has contextualised the research and begun to frame the significance of the study for both policy and practice and to develop the knowledge base.

To that end the research objectives were fourfold and to establish:

1. How is the impact of performance management processes shaped by managerial attitudes and behaviour?
2. How are these issues affected by issues of power, control and the academic environment?
3. How does performance management impact upon matters of conflict?
4. To what extent (and how) can performance management strategies be tailored to reflect notions of collegiality and autonomy that have traditionally underpinned the academic environment.

### **1.3 Structure of Research Study**

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter two provides a detailed review of the literature beginning with an analysis of the topic of new public management before moving into the literature around performance management and performance appraisal. This is followed by an examination of the key role played by line managers in identifying and addressing performance. The review then begins to develop the conceptual foundations of the thesis by considering notions of surveillance, control and power and how these shape performance management and appraisal constructs. This leads to an exploration of conflict and resistance.

Chapter three applies the discussion to the HE context, with a focus on the academic environment and associated issues of autonomy, collegiality and status. An examination of organisational structures in HE and how problems of performance measurement impact on the management of performance in the sector is then provided. The chapter then locates the implications and challenges of performance management within academic settings and addresses potential nuanced forms of conflict which might emerge as a consequence of increased management and scrutiny of performance. The chapter concludes with a description of the conceptual framework which guides this research.

Chapter four offers a detailed explanation of the methodological approach to this research, and discloses my ontological and epistemological position as a researcher. In providing a rationale for the decisions which have guided this research a critical comparison of available methodologies is provided, as a means of explaining my approach to the research and the underpinning philosophical stance that I have taken.

Chapter five presents a description of the methods within the research, making connections between the aforementioned methodology and some practical considerations which guided the research.

Chapter six delivers a highly detailed account of the chosen method of data analysis and follows Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-stage model. These stages are: familiarisation with the data; the generation of initial codes; the search for themes; the review of themes; and the definition of sub-themes. The sixth and final stage, the production of a report, is presented in this thesis as chapter seven, which comprises of a presentation of the findings.

Chapter eight presents a discussion of the results. This section is structured using the research questions as sub-headings and involves the connection between the key findings and the literature. This chapter considers areas of the literature which find synergy with the findings, but also presents those which strike a potential discord.

The thesis is completed with chapter nine, which provides an insight into the contribution the research has made to the knowledge base and implications for policy and practice. The chapter also considers the limitations of the research and suggests areas of future research.

## **1.4 Summary**

This chapter has described the rationale and background of the research and helped to contextualise the nature of the study. The research aims and objectives have been clearly stated and the structure of thesis has been presented. The following chapters present the literature which will inform the primary research for the thesis.



## **CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT AND IMPACT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

### **2.0 Introduction**

The previous chapter presented the objectives of this study. It also highlighted the contribution of this study to the field of people management research and outlined a structure for the remainder of the thesis. This chapter provides a detailed overview of the prevailing literature on topics directly influencing, and informing the primary research. It begins by providing a discussion of the context in which the current emphasis on performance management within the public sector has developed. It then goes on to explore the wider literature in relation to performance management, performance appraisal and the key role of line managers. The review initially considers the more prescriptive literature on the topic, before engaging in the more critical debates. The critical literature addresses the importance of power, authority and control and how these issues relate to the management of performance. Issues of workplace conflict are then considered, as the discussion begins to frame the potential negative implications of and reactions to, performance management.

### **2.1 The Impact of New Public Management**

The increased focus on performance management in the public sector has been strongly influenced by the introduction of the new public management (NPM) paradigm (Hood, 1991; Ferlie, *et al.*, (1996). Advocates of NPM suggest that public services could be improved and that both bureaucracy and spending from the public purse could be reduced, by focussing on process redesign, and the identification of efficiency gains within government departments (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Administrative reviews and transformation, with a more business-like and managerialist ideology was

the narrative that encapsulated the reform process, alongside a changing focus on the use of private sector measures and approaches, such as quasi-markets and contracting (Glynn and Murphy, 2008). Cutler (2011) contends that performance management techniques were prevalent in certain factions of local government, such as the NHS before NPM and that as such, the evolution and focus towards performance management within the public sector was arguably not entirely as a consequence of NPM. Some credence is given to this view from Broadbent (2001), who noted that NPM is no longer “new” and highlights the debate surrounding the rhetoric of NPM and whether or not it was in fact ever “new”.

This is due to the numerous reforms of public services since the leadership of Edward Heath in the 1970s and their espoused benefits in improving public sector service delivery (Pollitt, 2013). The label and constructs of NPM are troublesome and the subject of academic debate, with competing and complimentary notions describing the reform process within the public sector, such as managerialism, reinvention (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, cited in Davis and Stazyk, 2014) and stake-holding (Murdock, 2004). Indeed, one of the seminal writers on NPM, Christopher Hood, has written of it being ‘middle-aged and riddled with paradoxes (Hood and Peters, 2004). An example of one of these paradoxes, can be seen in Gregory’s (1995, cited in Hood and Peters, 2004) “production paradox”. This relates to the intensive focus on outputs, underpinned by performance contracts and indicators within public management. This type of “control routine” can, according to Gregory, amount to all public services being treated as “production agencies”, whose performance can be easily observed and measured. Extending this approach to other public services, where results and activities are more ambiguous, can lead to unintended outcomes. For Gregory, this included what Hood and Peters describe as a “blurring rather than (...) clarification of

management responsibilities within executive government” (p.270). This type of unintended consequence illuminates one of the paradoxes afflicting NPM. Clearly, the higher education sector, with its flatter organisational structures and opaque labour process, aligns with Gregory’s depiction of organisations which might suffer from NPM’s unintended outcomes. Furthermore, Hood and Peters explain that paradoxes are apparent because “like most divinities, NPM turned out to be somewhat mystical in essence, as no two authors of that era listed exactly the same features in enumerating its traits” (p.268).

Nonetheless, NPM initiatives have been generally identified as a driver for change and modernisation of public services, to mirror practices prevalent in the private sector (Hood, 1991 and Siltala, 2013). Perhaps if the view is accepted that NPM isn’t entirely ‘new’, and that some transformation occurred under the Heath administration; then it was possibly the more radical tenet of Thatcherism that dramatically increased the level of accountability and focus on the need for efficiency within the sector. It is for this reason, that NPM under Thatcher might be most strongly viewed as the period within which the landscape changed within the public sector, both at the macro level, in terms of the range and nature of services provided, and the micro level regarding the way in which services were delivered (Kajimbwa, 2013).

A key, yet subtle change in the use of the language adopted during the public service reform was the transfer from the term public services administration, to public services management. Broadbent (2007 p7) explains that NPM:

“...seeks to move away from the notion of administration or stewardship and towards more proactive notions of management; that seeks to adopt market approaches and minimise centralised planning regimes; that it

seeks to bring private sector approaches to the management of public services”.

These doctrines were rooted under the guise of a neo-liberal paradigm, one that believed that the answer for improved public services was for a government that was catalytic, (steering rather than rowing), community-owned (empowering rather than serving); competitive, by injecting competition into service delivery, mission-driven instead of rule-driven, results-oriented, customer-driven, enterprising, anticipatory, decentralized and market-oriented (Denhar, 2004, cited in de Vries, 2012). The Thatcher manifesto therefore set about decentralising aspects of the public sector, began to define and measure outputs and focussed on service efficiency, whilst also looking to “trim the fat” within institutions whilst adopting a sigma-type value system (Hood, 1991). Institutional attention on internal operations developed managerial structures, delegated responsibility to operational managers and led to an evolving culture of measurement. The mantra “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it” led to the increasing use of accountancy-base models as a means by which to scrutinise individual accountability (Broadbent, 2007)

Public management proponents explain that NPM was conceived, at least in part, due to concern about spending in the public sector and the apparent bloated nature of the various institutions (Pollitt, 1993 and Tolofari, 2005). The 1981 ‘Efficiency in Government: The Scrutiny Programme’ white paper set out the Thatcher government’s intention to address government spending and efficiency (Lord President of the Council, 1981 cited in Pollitt, 2013). This was due to concerns from the treasury that running costs had exceeded inflation in the early 1980’s (Hood and Dixon, 2013). The Thatcher government was particularly predisposed to the notion of cost efficiency, and commentators have identified that NPM was used initially as a means by which to cut

costs; to the potential detriment of service quality (Hood and Dixon, 2013 and Pollitt, 1993). This view was held due to the fact that cost savings often resulted in reduced staffing and a trimming of the service, to minimise what the ministerial establishment considered waste (Hood, 1991). The use of a sigma system, akin to that used within private sector, manufacturing environments, is evidence of the evolution of service delivery from a public administration to private sector value system. Hood (1991, p.12) identified the following doctrines as reflecting the NPM paradigm:

(i) 'just-in-time' inventory control systems (which avoid tying up resources in storing what is not currently needed, pushing the onus of accessible storage and rapid delivery on to suppliers);

(ii) payment-by-results reward systems (which avoid paying for what is not being delivered); and

(iii) administrative 'cost engineering' (using resources sparingly to provide public services of no greater cost, durability or quality than is absolutely necessary for a defined task, without excessive concern for 'externalities').

The currency and measure of success within this value system are costs and time. There is little evidence of a quality focus as an area of primary concern.

This is perhaps unsurprising; as financial imperatives were seen as the major vehicle for instigating government reform. As such the term New Public Financial Management has been used (Guthrie, *et al.*, 1999) to clearly articulate the use of financial and accounting-based techniques, that were used as guiding principles for change. It would be remiss to suggest that these accounting techniques focussed solely on bottom line results and fiscal targets alone. Whilst this was clearly an intended outcome, particularly under Thatcher, other methods and measures of

performance were utilised. Where numerical metrics were used for tangible areas of public service delivery, surveillance and audits were introduced to measure less tangible areas of the sector including healthcare and education (Broadbent, 2007).

The privatisation of a number of state enterprises was a key feature of NPM, particularly under Thatcher, who privatised institutions such as British Steel, British Rail and British Airways (Scott-Samuel et al., 2014). Utilities including water, gas and electricity and were also open to tender as part of a free market ideology. The merit of this privatisation was seen as two-fold; service users could adopt a consumerist approach and competition could provide a potentially more efficient service. The government view here, in principle at least is that:

“...the invisible hand of the marketplace will provide the accountability mechanism – such that if policy and programme provision is not what the end-users want they will exercise their market power and go elsewhere – leaving providers of unwanted, overly-expensive or inappropriate services facing insolvency, a novel concept, at least for public sector service providers”. (Glynn and Murphy, 2008, p126).

Glynn and Murphy’s description above could be clearly applied to the HE sector, with the newly competitive marketplace, providing students with greater choice, allowing them to adopt a far more consumerist approach. This will be addressed further in section 3.1.

During the terms of the Major, and latterly the Blair governments, there was an increased focus on service quality. These included the increased use of, and reliance upon, metrics and benchmarking, (Holloway, *et al.*, 1999) and the use of league tables (Guthrie, *et al.*, 1999 and Hood and Dixon, 2013) as a means of measuring and

legitimising performance. Indeed Pollitt (1993) suggests that it was Major's *Citizens Charter* (1991) white paper, which was much maligned at the time, that had made the clearest attempt of identifying measurable outcomes in terms of service quality and efficiency that could be appropriately evaluated to determine the impact of government reform. In academic settings there are now numerous systems to rank and measure university performance, often resulting in competition between universities (Pritchard *et al.*, 2015). The extent to which these league tables are accurate measures of service quality is open to debate. Indeed, Pollitt, commenting generally on government attempts to measure performance observed that white papers failed to articulate "a set of measurable targets against which success or failure could have been assessed" (Pollitt, 2013 p.469). However, it was suggested that the term NPM should be reserved for this more contemporary measure of performance, that had evolved from Thatcher's 'neo-Taylorist' approach of efficiency as a primarily cost cutting exercise, to an agenda for wider efficiency and service quality (Pollitt, 1993, cited in Hood and Dixon, 2013). Despite the change in government, Blair continued the focus on identifying efficiency gains within the public sector, but did this from an arguably more pragmatic position focussing on efficiency, responsiveness to service user needs, increased transparency, reduced waste and improved complaints procedures (Drewry, 2005).

Importantly, it is argued that NPM is a product of an ideological shift to a managerialist ideology. Pollitt (2014) explains that managerialism is a broader concept than NPM, and that NPM is contained within the managerialist ideology. Attempts to achieve efficiency and transform services, according to Pollitt, are born from managerial effort:

"It is *management* which, in the public sector, will deliver more with less (...), will stimulate greater innovation right across government and the business

sector (...), that will direct and channel professional skills so as to focus on the highest priority goals” and “will turn political aspirations into measurable outputs and outcomes” (Pollitt, 2014, p.3).

Hood argues that due to the relative level of centralisation within UK government, opportunities for targets and league tables can be optimised. For example health trust chief executives and ‘superheads’ in education are presented with targets and the government is able to maintain a relational distance between those in charge of service delivery and those who monitor performance (Hood, 2007). Whilst NPM theory suggests that the answers to efficiency and service quality lie in adoption of market principles and management (see Hood, 1995; Broadbent, 2007; Pollitt, 2014), there is an inherent need for government to scrutinise and monitor performance, to ensure accountability and transparency (McAdam, *et al.*, 2005) and to maintain consistency in service, and accountability to policy agenda’s (Addicott, 2008).

Hood (2007) argues that the use of these tables as an evidence base for the application of NPM as an ideology, should be treated with caution, and contends that management and scrutiny of numerical outputs have been prevalent throughout history, with examples of crime figures and hospital statistics being scrutinised in the days of Florence Nightingale. This view is supported by Cutler (2011) who cites performance management in the NHS as prevailing prior to the conception of NPM ideologies. Hood (2007) suggests that it is the *emphasis* and political importance of these outputs that is the main area of change. The use of performance measurement systems are inherent in government as a means by which to improve transparency, strengthen accountability and to build a performance culture within governance, in order to support policymaking, budget decisions and management (Talbot, 2010).



Consequently, a quick internet trawl provides access to numerous government performance metrics using terms such as “input” and “impact” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2014). Where neo-liberalism and marketization thrives and the “invisible hand” of the market allows consumers to “vote with their feet”, efficiency and accountability is likely to be a means of market survival. However, where free market choice is unavailable, governments utilise a range of internal proxies, performance measures, KPI’s and audits to assess performance (Glynn and Murphy, 2008).

There is an inexorable political need to present positive findings to the voting public, to evidence improvement and demonstrate value for money from public services (Curristine, *et al.*, 2007 and Addicott, 2008). Drewry (2005) contends that anecdotal evidence suggests a consequence of scrutiny on performance outcomes means that public servants might manipulate the recording of information. Additionally, such practices undermined the rhetoric of NPM proxies such as accountability and transparency (Pollitt, 2013).

The continued prevalence of NPM practices is a source of some academic debate, with some commentators asserting that NPM is dead (see Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006 for example). However, whilst NPM is acknowledged as hard to define (Hood, 1991, 1995), paradoxical (Hood, 2000) and its “New-ness” debated (Broadbent, 2006) there is partial agreement that society has now entered into a period of Post-NPM (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). However, Pollitt (2014) makes a compelling case for the maintained application of the NPM paradigm and explains that principles are widely adopted in practice and inherent in the culture of many organisations:

“(...) I am disinterring managerialism, and NPM, because I would like to argue that they are thriving. They may have been buried alive by some

academics, but nobody told most of the practitioners. And then, since the financial crisis of 2007/8 and the ensuing economic and fiscal crises, I would even say that in some countries NPM has made a modest comeback” (Pollit, 2014, p.2).

The success of NPM is a source of contention, and the extent to which NPM successfully achieved its aims of efficiency and, in particular its fiscal objective of cost reduction is a matter of some debate (Hood and Dixon, 2013 and Pollitt, 2013). However, the focus of performance management as a consequence of the NPM paradigm continues, and in certain sectors (such as HE), has become even more intense.

## **2.2 Performance Management**

The sustained focus on performance metrics and the need to quantify performance has led to organisations increasingly utilising performance management systems within their organisations. This section will critically analyse the topic of performance management and consider a range of approaches and challenges that are described in the literature.

The term performance management is one taken from the management literature, and was first used in the late 1970s, and gained credibility in the latter half of the 1980s (Armstrong and Baron, 1998, cited in Martinez, 2001). This timeline has obvious parallels with the rise of the NPM paradigm and the development of managerialist ideologies. Performance management is described as a systematic approach of planning, monitoring, developing, rating and rewarding of (good) performance (Bhattacharyya, 2011). CIPD (2015) define performance management as:

“... a holistic process that ensures employees’ performance contributes to business objectives. It brings together many elements of good people management practice, including learning and development, measurement of performance, and organisational development.”

These definitions and terms such as “systematic” and “holistic” lend themselves to the notion of a set of clear practices being prevalent within organisations, and a planned strategy for the alignment of individual goals to that of the organisation’s objectives. However, it is argued that performance management should be a flexible rather than overly rigid process; one that is continuous and owned by managers, and as such, performance management principles should perhaps be viewed as a framework that both management and employees work within (Armstrong, 2006).

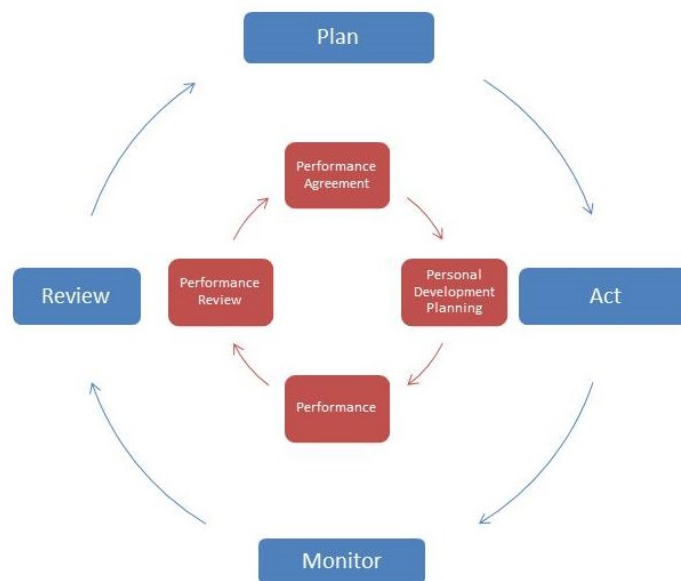
Performance management is concerned with the measurement and review of performance, outcomes and outputs and continuous development and improvement (Aguinis, 2007 and CIPD, 2011). However, it also considers inputs and values; inputs relate to the knowledge, skills and behaviour of the workforce that is required to achieve results. Additionally, the development of appropriate behavioural competencies within the workforce should support the values of the organisation (Armstrong, 2006). The aspirations of performance management systems are therefore far reaching, and, whilst many might assume that performance management is solely concerned with performance improvement and measurement, some argue that performance management, when delivered appropriately, is a far more strategically aligned guiding principle for the day-to-day management and development of the workforce. Armstrong and Bratton (1998, cited in CIPD, 2011, p.2) therefore contend that performance management is:

“A strategy which relates to every activity of the organisation set in the context of its human resource policies, culture, style and communications systems.”

The strategy is one that is individual and shaped by the context of the organisation, and perhaps even the sector (CIPD, 2011). Consequently, it would appear that the utilisation of performance management systems might vary, and be delivered subjectively depending upon numerous factors including the sector, culture of the organisation, and the nature of the market in which the organisation resides.

Having acknowledged this subjectivity, it is important to note that whilst discrepancies might exist within the application of performance management systems, models are often similar. For example, Armstrong (2006) identified that organisations in the UK banking sector, Scottish public sector and US defence sector shared broadly similar models of performance management. These are identified in Figure 1 overleaf.

The use of the diagram in Figure 1 helps to articulate the continuous nature of performance management within organisations. This simple framework helps to explain the distinction between performance management and (i) performance measurement (see section 2.3) and (ii) performance review or appraisal (see section 2.4). Performance management tools should clarify the plan of activities – what to do and how to do it. Then the act – the work that needs to be done; followed by the checks (monitoring stage) that are required to ensure that activities and outcomes are measured, which in turn allows for progress to be identified.



**Figure 1 – Performance Management Cycle Adapted from Armstrong (2006)**

Finally, the review stage gives consideration to what has been achieved and the implications for this in terms of any corrective action (Armstrong, 2006). The diagram also articulates that performance appraisal sits within the performance management construct.

Terms within the performance management literature are often used interchangeably (Biron, *et al.*, 2011). Commentators will often describe performance appraisal and performance measurement as if these tools were themselves performance management (Edmonstone, 1996), this is problematic not only for secondary research but also for the primary research within this study; it will be important to ensure that participants are comfortable with the language of performance management and performance appraisal. Tangen and Stefan (2005) contend that the terminology used within the discourse is often vaguely defined and therefore poorly understood. Even professional bodies such as the CIPD, have identified in their own research a lack of unified understanding of performance management in practice. There was:

“...a great deal of confusion around what the term performance management actually meant, with many practitioners substituting it for the tools of performance management, such as performance appraisal or performance- related pay” (2011, p.4).

It is important to ensure an understanding of the performance management constructs and toolkits available to organisations. The scope of performance management is greater than that of performance appraisal and measurement systems. It is argued that performance management systems should assist with the continuous scrutiny of performance on a day-to-day basis and should be integrated within the fabric of the organisation (Biron *et al.*, 2011). A collection of processes underpin performance management, these include the setting of corporate and departmental goals, individual objectives and appraisal, reward strategies, training schemes and individual career plans (Roberts, 2001 cited in Biron, *et al.*, 2011). These areas of individual and business performance are often measured using accountancy based techniques (Prowse and Prowse, 2010 and Bratton and Gold, 2012).

Critics of performance management systems propose that performance management systems are no more than “bean counting” exercises which take individuals away from what they consider to be the primary function of their role, to ensure that performance is evidenced and to satisfy internal audits (Marr and Creelman, 2011). Hoverstadt (2009), warns that “bean counting” organisations often make future strategic decisions based on retrospective information and that a reliance on numerical data can stifle an organisations organic growth and impede development into emerging markets. This issue is particularly prominent where there is an over reliance on performance data which inhibits developmental management.

Reflecting on and being consumed by past performance also dilutes the espoused benefits of the performance management process. Advocates for the use of performance management explain that the system is an inclusive process and one that has the potential to engage employees at all levels of the organisation. Aguis, *et al.*, (2011) and Rees and Porter (2003) contend that for benefits of performance management to be realised, managers must ensure that employees' activities and outputs are congruent with the organisational goals, and that the process of setting and reviewing goals and objectives is never ending. Managers should also observe performance and provide coaching and feedback. Conversely, Ledford *et al.*, (1994, cited in Chubb, *et al.*, 2011) explains that as managers often have numerous subordinates, it becomes increasingly difficult for managers to genuinely know about the performance of each and every one of their staff.

This has implications not only for the understanding of performance but also as to how this might impact upon coaching and development. If a manager has limited knowledge of performance of the individual then this compromises their ability to provide coaching and mentoring on areas for development. This returns us to the issue of context in the application of performance management (CIPD, 2011). Certain sectors and cultures might lend themselves more easily to the use of performance management constructs. This is an area that the research will aim to address by contextualising performance management in higher education; a sector with a matrix structure, culture of autonomy and collegiality and labour ambiguity. Aguinis, *et al.*, (2011, p.506) explain that performance management systems should be congruent with organisational culture:

“...imagine an organization that has a culture where communication is not fluid and hierarchies are rigid. In such an organization, a 360 degree

feedback system - whereby individuals receive comments on their performance from subordinates, peers, and superiors - is likely to be resisted, and thus ineffective”.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the design of performance management systems should take account of the organisational context, and that the extent to which systems and settings are aligned might affect the system's success. And yet organisations often “look over the fence to see what others are doing and do the same” (Colville and Milner, 2011, p.35), which is a dangerous, costly decision often fraught with pitfalls (Rees and Porter, 2003). The diverse nature of the staff constituency might also need to be considered during the conception of performance management systems.

For example, in higher education there are academic and professional services staff, and in the NHS there are clinical and administrative support staff. It might therefore follow that if the work setting and measures are so different, then the systems might also need to be. Chubb, *et al.*, (2011) argue that performance management systems should be delivered consistently throughout the organisation, in order for standards of behaviour and performance to be clarified. Therefore, the manager might have to take responsibility for articulating and nuancing the delivery of performance management constructs to ensure that they are fit for purpose for the individuals that they are responsible for. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p15) contend that: “Poorly designed or inadequate policies can be ‘rescued’ by good management behaviour in much the same way as ‘good’ HR practices can be negated by poor front-line manager behaviour or weak leadership”. The role of the line manager as coach, mentor, policy articulator and performance reviewer is therefore multifaceted and pivotal (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Harney and Jordan, 2008).



A key distinguishing factor between performance management and reviewing activity such as appraisal, is the continuous nature of performance management (Biron *et al.*, 2011; Aguinis *et al.*, 2011). Supporters of performance management contend that it is by ingraining performance management constructs into the everyday operations of the organisation that yield positive results from the process (Chubb, *et al.*, 2011). This presupposes that managers are sufficiently trained or skilled and have the requisite time to manage performance continuously. Despite the rhetoric of performance management replacing traditional appraisal systems (Mcadam, *et al.*, 2011) performance appraisals still seem to provide the basis for individual performance related discussions in most workplaces. CIPD (2009) argue that evidence of effective performance management systems include individual performance and organisational performance citing these as the chief measures of the success of performance management. Other measures outlined in the report include the use of performance against Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) and measures of employee engagement. It is interesting to note that the CIPD (2009, p.17) identified that:

“There is a real sense of the difficulties of evaluating the impact of performance management in isolation from other factors that might also be influencing the performance of both individuals and the business. Some interviewees felt that lots of things were being measured but not necessarily informing performance management outcomes. There is no clear consensus on how these might be overcome, but most believe that performance management does make an impact and feel it is up to practitioners to argue the case based on the evidence available”.

The issue of evidence is one that has called into question the effectiveness of performance management and has led to the use of the term “black box” regarding

performance management and HRM strategies (Harney and Jordan, 2008; Edgar and Geare, 2009). This notion asserts that there are organisational goals and individual performance outcomes and a degree of ambiguity over the influences and impacts of what happens in between. This ambiguity in the performance chain might be linked to the role and competence of line managers. It is argued that the discretionary effort, appropriate behaviour and attitudes of employees are shaped and influenced by the relationship with the line manager (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Harney and Jordan, 2008). Chubb, *et al.*, (2011) and Aguinis, *et al.*, (2011) posit that the value of performance management is derived, in part at least, from frequent coaching, mentoring and feedback from managers. The continuous nature of these interventions, mean that they are often likely to be less formal, and possibly not documented or evidenced. It is potentially for this reason that the ambiguity in causal links between performance management and performance outcomes exists. Conversely, performance appraisals are *evidence* of attention being paid to the issue of employee performance, despite numerous arguments that such processes are outdated (see for example, Law and Tam, 2007).

It is acknowledged that performance management is located within a wider political and economic context. The literature on new public management suggests that management pre-occupation is often focussed on efficiency and cost cutting, due to changes (and reductions) in funding streams (see Pollitt, 1993; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; Hood and Dixon, 2013). What then of the application of performance management systems toward personal development planning, career and talent management, and the integration of reward strategies (CIPD, 2009; Chubb, *et al.*, 2011)? The performance appraisal is often utilised for such discussions, particularly in relation to personal development planning and reward development (Rees and

Porter, 2003; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007b). Assertions that performance management has *replaced* performance appraisal might therefore be misplaced; and it is instead worth acknowledging that appraisals have a role within the performance management toolkit.

Performance management application and usefulness is a source of academic debate. Many proponents of the use and value of performance management systems are from HR practitioner perspectives, as such it is often argued that there is a lack of sufficient empirical evidence to support the role of HRM and performance management in improving organisational performance (Prowse and Prowse, 2010; Worsfold, 1999). Whilst the work of Bloom and Van Reenen (2010) provides some tangible evidence of the impact of HRM bundles (particularly around pay and incentives) on worker productivity, they too lament the scarcity of high quality data which makes firm connections between HRM policy and practices, and organisational performance. Earlier reports suggest that HR practices which reward effort and performance are associated with better firm performance (Bloom, *et al.*, 2009).

The critical literature suggests that improving individual performance does not necessarily support improved organisational performance (Briner, 2015). This is particularly true if individual objectives do not directly affect the achievement of organisational goals (Prowse and Prowse, 2010; CIPD, 2011). Suff (2007) cites the example of performance-related pay as encouraging the wrong type of behaviour by focussing on and rewarding individual effort at the expense of notions of teamwork. These issues perhaps explain why a number of organisations are dissatisfied with their performance management systems, and that some decide to abolish the traditional appraisal in favour of ongoing performance management discussions (Rock and Jones, 2015; Cappelli and Travis, 2016). Whilst frustrations with performance

management systems are perhaps understandable, the removal of the appraisal meeting, which all good practice suggests should *summarise* ongoing performance conversations (Hutchinson, 2013; Acas, 2014), might actually point to a wider misunderstanding of performance management and performance appraisal processes, and the distinction between the two.

These factors should be considered within performance management system design, including the performance appraisal process if organisations are to derive tangible benefits from these practices. The following section critically considers the performance appraisal process which is widely regarded as the central pillar of performance management (Hutchinson, 2013).

### **2.3 Performance Appraisal**

Section 2.2 has discussed where the performance appraisal sits within the wider performance management framework. Despite the numerous criticisms of performance appraisal, which will be addressed later in this section, it is estimated that 80-90% of organisations in the UK (and USA) use them (Prowse and Prowse, 2010a). Appraisal systems have also evolved in scope and are now increasingly used throughout the workforce, rather than being focussed solely on professional and managerial positions (Prowse and Prowse, 2010a). Van Wanrooy, et al., (2013) report that the appraisal of non-management staff has risen from 43% in 2004 to 70% in 2011. As organisations attempt to maximise performance and efficiency, the focus on individual performance has increased. Consequently, so too has the role of union and non-union representative time spent in dealing with appraisal related issues. This has jumped from 27% to 42% in the period 2004-2011.

Within the contemporary discourse, Armstrong (2017, p71) explains that the traditional performance review, or performance appraisal is intended, but often fails to address:

*Assessment* – to review how well individuals have performed their jobs

*Objective Setting* – to set new objectives and revise existing ones

*Development planning* – to agree performance and personal development plans.

*Motivation* – to provide feedback and recognition.

*Communication* – to serve as a two-way channel for communication about roles, expectations relationships, work problems and aspirations.

*Reward* – to assess performance in order to inform reward decisions, especially those concerning performance pay

*Talent Management* – to identify potential as part of a talent management programme

*Poor Performance* – to identify underperformers so that corrective action can be taken

Performance appraisals are used in an attempt by organisations to influence the behaviour and attitudes of employees as a means to improve organisational performance (Brown, *et al.*, 2010). Goal setting in the form of employee objectives are frequently used to provide employees with targets for performance and behaviour, which they are measured against during the review period and assessed upon at the end of the performance cycle. Frequently the performance appraisal requires line managers to assess their sub ordinates and often some form of performance rating scale is used (Armstrong, 2017), however a number of commentators report that the use of ratings, forced and even guided distribution is reducing (CIPD, 2016; Kinley, 2016). Where rating systems remain, these provide managers with multiple point scales for the rating of employees, in relation to quality of performance or the level of

competence achieved (Armstrong, 2017). Where scales are used, these can include anything from 3–6 rating levels, although CIPD (2004, cited in Armstrong 2006) explain that the majority of organisations utilise 5 levels. Table 1 provides a typical example of the rating descriptors.

	Outputs	Competencies
5	Exceeded standards required on all targets	All competencies rated 'outstanding'
4	All targets achieved to required standards: Some exceeded.	A mix of 'good' and outstanding ratings
3	Most targets achieved to required standard	Most competencies rated 'good'
2	Many targets achieved close to standard. A few not met, but progress made.	Most competencies rated 'marginal'
1	Very few or no targets achieved to standard.	Most competencies rated 'poor'

**Table 1 - Performance Rating Scale. Adapted from: Whiddett and Hollyforde (2003, p.93)**

Armstrong (2006) explains that organisational decision-making in relation to the level of ratings differ, as does the chosen language used within descriptors. Advocates of three choice models explain that people are not capable of making finer distinctions on levels of performance beyond those that are good, poor and somewhere in the middle. The opposing view is that managers do want to make more refined judgements, beyond good, bad and indifferent and that finer distinctions are particularly helpful when making decisions when relating pay to performance (Armstrong, 2006). An obvious reason for managers to inflate feedback or ratings is

as a means of avoidance of difficult conversations with staff. Furthermore, managers often fail to adequately distinguish between performers by using the middle rating of the traditional 5 level system, a trait known as the “central tendency” (Prowse and Prowse, 2010a; Lunenburg, 2012). Organisations have historically attempted to challenge this managerial behaviour through the use of aforementioned forced distribution practices (Hutchinson, 2013). Such systems are reported as leading to feelings of resentment from both employees and line managers (Armstrong, 2006). This is particularly true of ratings that compare employees to one another (relative performance). Chattopadhyay, (2012, p.882) contends that:

“a forced distribution in performance evaluation leads to extreme level of job dissatisfaction among the employees with high potential to perform (...)

In practice, a relatively low-performing member in a high-performing team can often be better than the best performer in an average performing team”.

Given this evidence it is perhaps unsurprising that the use of such practices has diminished (CIPD, 2016). Whilst any move away from forced distribution should be viewed positively, given the evidence of unhealthy competition and negative impacts on motivation, the absence of such systems arguably provides a space for managers to avoid challenging conversations and minimise the potential for episodes of conflict. Randell’s (1994) work would support this position; he suggests that it is the methods of evaluation are problematic, not least because of the paucity of performance measures available. Consequently, more qualitative forms of assessment are suggested, and are highlighted as particularly relevant for developmental appraisal discussions. Randell makes a compelling case for appraisal being development led as opposed to assessment led, and highlights the flawed conception of appraisal, built on a misguided belief that holistic measurement is achievable and is the foundation of

appraisal. A greater focus on development, and qualitative aspects would, according to Rendall, also resolve the issues organisations face in terms of ratings and their accuracy, as conversations are targeted toward future performance. McGregor (1957) also highlights the benefits of future looking appraisal systems, and provides evidence of managerial reluctance in judging subordinates, a position supported by Grint (1992). The literature review thus far has identified some of the factors that lead to the subjectivity in ratings given by the appraising manager, however effective appraisals are subject to numerous further challenges.

Davis (2012) explains that there are seven problems with the appraisal process which serve to undermine their value. These include direct and indirect bias of the manager conducting the appraisal. Grint (1992) provides a thorough depiction of the ways in which bias affects the appraisal process, and the range of different types of bias that appraisal discussions, and appraisees, might fall victim to. Davis also cites issues of competency, not least of the manager (which will be addressed later) but also of the person being appraised. Davis advises that some organisations train managers in the appraisal process, but few organisations train non-management staff, which might prevent them actively engaging in the appraisal process and lead to inconsistencies. Lack of training of the appraisee might contribute to the view that appraisals are punitive and top-down control systems (Chubb, *et al.*, 2011). Maier's (1958, cited in Rendall, 1994) work highlights the longstanding recognition of the importance of managerial training and interpersonal skill development as vital for successful appraisal, and suggests notions of assessment and ratings are concerned with organisational control imperatives. Despite this, some sixty years later, the appraisal is prone to the same critique.



Davis (2012) suggests that the devolution of HR responsibility to line managers is also problematic. Appraisal policy and process is often designed by the HR department, but delivered by managers. Line managers are not included in design and this causes feelings of confusion, resentment and a lack of “buy-in”. Armstrong (2017) suggests that key stakeholders or “systems users” including line managers and those being appraised should be involved in the design of appraisal systems. Rendall (1994) highlights the importance of a contingency approach to appraisal design, which recognises the importance of the organisational setting and context. Too often appraisal systems are generic and organisations lamented for adopting a one-size fits all system (Chubb, et al., 2011; Schmidle, 2015). The extent to which the appraisal and wider performance management system is tailored to the HE context will be interesting to investigate. Davis asserts that the appraisal can also become manager-centric, dominated by the manager and lead those being appraised to feel threatened and worried, due to the power imbalance. This is an area of particular interest in the context of the research. Davis (2012) explains that the performance review is often viewed as an “event” which occurs once a year, as such there is potential for problems to go unaddressed or to allow small problems to escalate, as they are not tackled in a timely fashion. This annualised approach is counter to the notions of regular, ongoing feedback. Finally, the use of 360 degree tools can be misused or exploited. This, according to Davis, adds to the subjectivity around the process and permits poor quality information to be used which is veiled in anonymity. Given this critique from Davis it is little wonder that Grint (1992, p.64) laments the appraisal, asserting that: “Rarely in the history of business can such a system have promised so much and delivered so little”.

The performance appraisal aims to measure (and often rate) past performance, set future objectives, include a discussion on learning and development and encourage positive reinforcement of areas of good performance and feedback on areas of improvement (Armstrong, 2017). The prescriptive literature presents an inherently appealing, if somewhat ambitious set of outcomes from performance appraisal processes, with a view to sustaining or improving performance (CIPD, 2015). The purported variance of outcome and multiplicity of purpose has led to a range of criticisms of the appraisal process within the performance literature (see Rees and Porter, 2003; Prowse and Prowse, 2010a; Davis, 2012). Bach (2005) explains that the future focus of performance objectives can act as a motivator for staff; done well it can align individual and corporate goals, and facilitate the learning and development of staff to achieve future objectives. However, this conflicts with the tendency for organisations to focus on the assessment of *past* performance, ratings and the potential distribution of rewards that follow.

Alternatively, the focus on past performance can result in more punitive outcomes (Taylor, 2013). Whilst the language within the HR discourse cites appraisal as developmental, organisations are often concerned with employee performance against targets as a primary area of focus. Therefore, employees are potentially unlikely to openly discuss areas of development or concern with their performance for fear that this might detrimentally impact on their appraisal rating, and subsequent reward (Newton and Findley, 1996; Rees and Porter, 2003). This also has implications for relationships between appraiser and the individual being reviewed. Brown et al. (2010) identified that employees who believed their supervisor to be competent and have a good understanding of the employee's role, would be more likely to trust their supervisor and have a positive appraisal experience. In such circumstances

productive discussions on learning and development *and* past performance might be possible.

The extent to which employees trust their line manager will inevitably be dependent upon social interactions, and past experiences or dealings between employee and manager. In the context of the performance appraisal, the perceived fairness of the practice in terms of process and outcomes will also shape employee behaviour and faith in the appraisal process (Farndale, *et al.*, 2010). The level of trust and perceived justice in the use of appraisal is a complex area shaped by previous experience, direct manager-employee relationships, process, and the organisational context (Den Hartog, *et al.*, 2004). Grint (1992) reports the political nature of appraisal, and contents that the appraisal is often viewed as a mechanism for justifying decisions that have been taken without regard for individual merit. Those subject to appraisal, according to Grint, are of the view that appraisers, and appraisal schemes are potentially untrustworthy. This is clearly problematic, as Purcell, *et al.*, (2003) identified that employee perceptions of performance management (including the use of appraisals) was of crucial importance if espoused benefits such as commitment were to be achieved.

Organisational justice inevitably underpins such perceptions of fairness and equity. Organisational justice takes two forms in the literature; (i) procedural and (ii) distributive. Procedural justice relates to perceptions of fairness in relation to process (Lind and Tyler, 1988). In the context of the appraisal this might be the steps that were taken to arrive at a performance rating (Farndale, *et al.*, 2010). Distributive justice addresses issues of equity in the outcomes of individuals (Lind and Tyler, 1988). In the context of appraisals, this might relate to the perceived fairness of evaluations (Farndale, *et al.*, 2010). Finally, employee involvement, for example in setting future

objectives is seen to be vital in underpinning perceptions of fairness (Farndale *et al.*, 2010). Issues of systems trust, closely linked to procedural justice, also impact upon employee perceptions of, and engagement with performance management. Searl and Skinner (2011) explain that systems trust relates to the extent to which employees believe systems are fair and reliable, protect the employee from harm, and recognise their relative powerlessness in dealing with organisational practices. Furthermore, they contend that interpersonal trust relates to the faith employees have in other individuals, usually their line manager, around their ability, benevolence and integrity.

CIPD (2015) guidance suggests that agreement should be reached at the appraisal. Clearly employees must have faith and trust in the system in order for meaningful agreement to take place. If agreement is successful it could be assumed that some form of employee involvement is achieved, as the process should provide a shared outcome between manager and employee. However, 'best practice' guidance such as that provided by the CIPD "...tend to explain how appraisal should work rather than provide evidence about how schemes work in practice" (Rees and Porter, 2003, p.281). This is a recurring theme, whereby tenets of the value, process and outcomes of appraisal are often identified from an HR practitioner led perspective, rather than that of a management practitioner. There is synergy here with the critique of the performance management literature (see Worsfold, 1999; Prowse and Prowse, 2010).

Perceptions of fairness and the extent to which outcomes are entirely agreed will inevitably be subjective. McGregor (1957) suggests that employees should set their own objectives, and that managers can therefore provide a supporting role in helping their staff achieve them, and help to tailor objectives to ensure they are congruent with organisational goals. McGregor also positioned the appraisal as an analysis, heavily involving the employee's self-reflection. Whilst there is some evidence of self-review

in some appraisal systems, it remains the case that the line manager remains responsible for giving feedback, measuring performance and identifying (or authorising) learning and development requests. The dynamic between manager and employee is therefore one that is fraught with potential pitfalls, which might prevent *agreement* and might lead to issues of conflict. Challenges facing line managers will be discussed later within the chapter. Chubb, *et al.*, (2011) explain that managers often lack appropriate skills to conduct appraisals effectively, in judging performance and in terms of having difficult conversations. Additionally, management subjectivity is explained as a causal link either through a lack of sufficient information on performance to make an informed decision, or through allowing bias to affect the decision. There is a plethora of literature on the subject of “recency” and “halo” effects (Palmer and Loveland, 2008; Brown, *et al.*, 2010; Prowse and Prowse, 2010a) which may call into question the judgements made during performance appraisals. These are factors where excellent performance prior to the appraisal might affect the rating given, meaning that the ratings and feedback are based on short-term exceptional performance as opposed to performance over the course of the year. Additionally, the appraisal validity and fairness is affected by the extent to which a manager likes or dislikes an individual (Chubb, *et al.*, 2011). Latham, *et al.*, (2008) argue that appraisals are more often a reflection of the appraiser rather than the appraised because of individual biases due to leniency, halo effects, and “similar-to-me” sentiments.

Managerial preconceptions also shape the decision making process regarding performance generally, but inevitably impact upon appraisals outcomes. Goodhew, *et al.*, (2008) explain that if a manager believes that a staff member is performing poorly, that they would be likely to watch that individual more closely, and look for errors. This increased the likelihood of errors being found; additionally, evidence of

good behaviours was viewed as abnormal. In contrast, if they believed a staff member was excelling, they would also watch that staff member, looking for examples of high performance with errors being explained away as aberrations. Meanwhile, good behaviour was treated as confirmation of the initial perception. This confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) has clear implications for appraisal processes, which should be treated objectively. Grint (1992) also suggests that the appraisal is used to justify decisions that do not truthfully consider individual merit and performance.

Prowse and Prowse, (2010a) describe further concerns for consistency and equity of appraisal ratings and potential distortion because of differences around gender and ethnicity, a view supported by Grint (1992). They cite studies in both the USA and the UK which demonstrate subjectivity in terms of gender (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1991; White, 1999) and ethnicity of the appraisee and appraiser (Geddes and Konrad, 2003). Such bias, whether conscious or unconscious, inevitably affects appraisal ratings and distorts performance management systems (Jawahar and Williams, 1997; Guralnik, *et al.*, 2004).

Organisations attempt to reduce subjectivity and bias by utilising 360 degree feedback. The use of 360 degree feedback is often used as a means by which to evaluate performance from a range of sources and to mitigate the role of the line manager as the sole source of evaluation (Lepsinger and Lucia, 2009). Prowse and Prowse, (2010a) suggest that this might resolve some the aforementioned issues of discrimination. 360 degree feedback can be gathered in a number of ways, through formal moderated multi-rater feedback and through less formal comment; but regardless of mechanism, the use of 360 degree feedback is intended to improve the quality of performance assessments (Chubb, *et al.*, 2011). Feedback from colleagues, direct reports and occasionally customers is often collected to deliver a rounded

picture of employee performance (Chubb, *et al.*, 2011). Grint (1992) describes the potential application of upward appraisal as a potential means of increasing employee voice, but acknowledges issues around bias and the potential for ratings and feedback to be corrupted by managerial inducement or reprisal. Issues for the organisation in all these systems include the timeliness and costliness of obtaining feedback, and the need for some evaluation of the feedback which can then be delivered to the employee.

Comprehensive 360 degree feedback is a costly exercise and therefore Rees and Porter (2003) explain that organisations should consider its effectiveness and benefits before implementing such a system. Whiddett and Hollyforde, (2003) explain that companies intent on developing a tailored 360 degree feedback mechanism use different questionnaires, based on appropriate competencies and levels for specific jobs. This seems entirely reasonable, and suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach might not be appropriate for 360 degree feedback. Purcell and Hutchinson, (2007a) explain that a number of organisations use 360 degree feedback to assess the effectiveness of line managers in organisations; additionally Lepsinger and Lucia (2009) explain that 360 degree appraisals are most frequently used within managerial populations or as a means to support succession planning, via the 360 appraisal of high-potential leaders. It is interesting to note here that organisations utilise some discretion and flexibility in the use of 360 degree appraisal, and yet the traditional top-down performance appraisal construct seems to generally adopt a one-size-fits-all approach (Chubb, *et al.*, 2011). Notwithstanding approaches such as the 360 degree appraisal, it often remains the responsibility of line managers to assess and evaluate employee performance.

## **2.4 The Role of the Line Manager**

The role of the line manager within the performance management and performance appraisal is one which presents a myriad of challenges. A number of these issues were examined by McGregor (1957) in his seminal critique of performance appraisal. McGregor identified the potential resistance that “personnel” might encounter, in the form of managerial reluctance to engage with traditional appraisal practices, citing the lack of managerial skill in handling appraisal interviews, and the reticence of managers to criticise and judge their employees. Despite this, a number of the issues highlighted, both with appraisal design, and managerial reactions to such design, remain unresolved within appraisal practices. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007a) describe the prominent role that line manager’s play within organisations, explaining that the multi-faceted nature of the role is often underappreciated, and not given ample consideration when appointing individuals to management roles. Furthermore, they suggest that the role of the line manager is vital for organisational success, and that employees consider their: “relationship with their line manager, especially their immediate or front-line manager, (...) especially important and powerful” (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007b, p.4).

Given the importance of the role, it seems incumbent upon organisations to provide managers with sufficient training to negotiate the apparent uncertain terrain that the performance appraisal presents. Indeed, investment in managerial development beyond that of the appraisal process seems to be vital to ensure that organisational benefits of performance management systems are realised (Rees and Porter, 2003; Biron, *et al.*, 2011) and to ensure that devolvment of HR responsibility to the line is successful (Perry and Kulik, 2008). Campbell and Evans, (2016) posit that on-the-job-training and coaching from line managers are increasingly effective workplace learning



tools, and yet somewhat paradoxically found declining perceptions surrounding the effectiveness of managers people development skills. These findings are widely supported by CIPD (2017) who report skill deficits in line management and leadership.

This is surprising given that Purcell and Hutchinson's study found that organisations recognised the link between the management of people and improved business performance. Hales and Rabey (2011) explain that frontline managers are often promoted as a reward for long service and dedication whilst others are promoted because of qualifications or experience from previous positions. Consequently, they contend that managers' measures of success are rarely concentrated on leadership skills but instead focus on their ability to demonstrate the right control. As such, according to Hales and Rabey, they become part of an organisations command and control approach.

Extending this position further, it seems that people management skills are usually not considered as important as technical ability in the recruitment and selection process. Purcell and Hutchinson, (2007b, p.13) argue that: "Few organisations seem to focus on the requirement to be a good 'people manager' in the recruitment process, where technical expertise is often the dominant requirement." This was perhaps more understandable prior to the devolvement of HR practices to line managers. However, Thornhill and Saunders (1998) amongst others have been providing commentary on the increased role of line managers for HR functions for some 20 years, yet evidence of increased attention to recruitment and training of managers is sparse. Organisations devolving such responsibility must surely want to ensure that those promoted or recruited to line management positions are able to handle such areas of responsibility.

Armstrong (2017) explains that it is important for individuals entrusted with such roles to have the necessary skills to manage an increasingly devolved set of HR activities. The literature review has explained that the role of managers in communicating and articulating organisational procedure and policy is key (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007b) and that employee effort, behaviour and attitudes are shaped and influenced by the relationship with the line manager (Harney and Jordan, 2008). Therefore, it would appear that organisations should give further consideration to people management capability within the recruitment and selection process, particularly as the appointment of employees who do not have appropriate people skills to line management positions can lead to increased organisational costs, employee turnover and lower morale (Acas, 2014). In the context of this research, issues of employee turnover and morale are particularly appropriate, as these might be precursors to, or the result of conflict in the workplace. Competency based recruitment aims to address these issues in part, but deference still appears to be given to technical expertise ahead of managerial or people management competence (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007b). Additionally, line managers view HR concerns as a poor second to more immediate goals (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003), this is perhaps not surprising if managers are recruited on the basis of skills other than people management capability, as they might then shy away from such activities.

Training, development and support is vital to ensure that the benefits of devolved HR responsibility to managers are realised. Harris, *et al.*, (2002) explain that managers themselves feel some specialist expertise is required to support them in HR activities. To devolve responsibility without identifying and developing managerial competence could dilute some of the espoused benefits of devolved HR, but at worst would appear to increase the risk of costly mistakes, lower morale, and potentially heighten the

chance for conflict within the workplace. Perry and Kulik (2008) explain that not all organizations provide HR training and support for managers and cite a lack of evidence of formal training to prepare line managers for HR issues. They also explain that the relationship between HR practitioners and managers is problematic in the upskilling of managers due to 'turf issues'. Acas (2014) explain that organisations need to provide more training for line managers, not just in managing conflict but within the wider remit of handling difficult conversations generally. Issues of conflict will be addressed later in the literature review, but it is useful to consider this in the context of managerial training.

It is little wonder that many managers view the appraisal process as a dreaded task and one which they would like to avoid (Goodhew, *et al.*, 2008; Prowse and Prowse, 2010; Mello, 2014,). Along with death and taxes, performance appraisals have been listed among life's most unpleasant experiences (Holcomb, 2006). This is perhaps inevitable as performance ratings (and potential implications for pay) and learning and development discussions present situations that could lead to issues of disagreement and conflict within the workplace environment. Research into issues of conflict within the appraisal process often focusses on issues of inflated feedback from managers as a means of conflict avoidance (Grote, 1996) but there is little literature on the impact that appraisal design has on issues of conflict.

Whilst issues around competence, confidence, training and support are vital, the prevailing literature continues to make a number of assumptions around the authority which managers are afforded. Weberian depictions of management suggest that hierarchy and structure reify notions of authority, and furthermore that managerial legitimacy is obtained through consent and acceptance from those who are managed (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). In traditional organisational settings these are not

unreasonable tenets of management. However, as we will discuss in the next chapter and also see when the findings are examined, in academic settings these assumptions are problematic. Structures within the academic environment are complex, and do not provide the traditional hierarchical lines of authority which are present in other sectors. Furthermore, autonomous professionals, suspicious of management, are potentially less likely to accept traditional manager-employee relationships, particularly where issues of status are present.

The topic of power, covered in further detail in section 2.5, is described by Weber in largely authoritative terms and there is often a conflation between authority and domination (both derive from the German term *Herrschaft*) throughout his book 'Economy and Society' (Bratton, et al., 2010). Weber defines power as legitimate authority, which requires efficiency and continuity. He describes structure and hierarchy (bureaucracy) as clearly influencing notions of power and recognises that consent and acceptance is required in order to achieve managerial legitimacy. Weberian approaches to authority appear to be problematic within the HE environment, and the extent to which line managers are able to adequately discharge their line management responsibility will be considered within this research. Authority, whilst potentially striking a discord with collegiate relations in academia, is often assumed within the appraisal design process, and has implications for the extent to which meaningful discussions are held during appraisal discussions.

## **2.5 Performance, Surveillance, Control and Power**

The more critical literature argues that performance management and performance appraisal are the very embodiment of management control and surveillance (Newton and Findley, 1996). The work of Foucault (1978-1979) and his book *Discipline and*

*Punish*, which addresses cultures of punishment and surveillance in prisons, is cited as an evidence base for much broader theories of surveillance in society (Gane, 2012). Returning to the notions of neo-liberalisation and new public management (see Hood, 1991; Pollit, 2013), it is suggested that performance management and scrutiny have evolved as a consequence of wider surveillance, discipline and normalization of society, and as a means of government regulation of the devolved market (Gane, 2012). The performance appraisal is often one of the more tangible aspects of such practices, and is viewed by some as a mechanism of organisational power.

The topic of power is one of the central tenets of the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984). In organisational settings power can be evidenced through constructs such as the performance appraisal, and associated measurement and surveillance activities. Foucauldian approaches are critical of notions of power which are conceptualised through individuals, institutions or structures. Instead, Foucault suggests that power is relational, at all levels, and deployed through practices and procedures (Foucault, 1977). Foucault describes the intrinsic link between power and knowledge and argues that power should therefore be viewed as a creative rather than oppressive process. Foucault's theory of the 'panopticon' – the all-seeing disciplinary gaze, which classifies, codifies and categorizes so that the individual becomes "knowable", posits that organisations benefit through improved understanding of "subjects".

In organisational settings, rationality assumes that before something can be managed it must be known; before decisions around job design, labour process and efficiency are considered, they must be understood. Such a position has a clear relationship and application to appraisal processes of measurement and evaluation. The surveillance, control and disciplinary structures which Foucault describes should therefore not only result in individuals exercising self-discipline and who consequently

become “docile and useful bodies” (Foucault, 1977, cited in Thompson and McHugh, p131) but should also aid decision making within organisations.

Terms such as obedience, compliance and control have clearly been spawned from Foucault’s theory of power with the outcome of mass management and bio-power, and the creation of mono-cultures being viewed as attainable results. Whilst Foucault describes the positive, knowledge creating ability of organisational power, there are obvious similarities with Taylorist doctrines:

“Through minute and detailed regulation, disciplines make possible the meticulous control of the body. The individual becomes subject to habits, rules, and orders; he or she operates as “one wishes, and with the techniques, speed and efficiency one determines” (Foucault, 1977, p.138).

Despite the fact that Foucault’s work has clearly impacted upon manufacturing concepts of TQM and JIT (Webster and Robbins, 1993 and Sewell, 1998), his concept of power, removed from agency or structure still faces criticisms regarding its practical applications (see Lukes, 2005 and Thompson and McHugh, 2009). However, Townley (1993) provides a comprehensive description of the reification of Foucault’s work to HRM practices and cites management by objectives and the performance appraisal (amongst others) as potential applications.

Furthermore, Townley (1993) provides a thorough interrogation of the notion of management and cites Willmott’s argument that management is inherently political because it is essentially rooted in the exercise of power. In her considered analysis of appraisal in academia she explains that “Management is synonymous with organizational functioning, a necessary set of tasks and roles for the efficient achievement of organizational objectives” (p.223). Townley (1993) argues that

depictions of power in economic terms are troublesome as too is the suggestion that power is a commodity of possession. Furthermore, she argues such conceptions highlight problems with a Weberian orthodoxy that assumes that managerial authority is achieved and legitimised through organisational hierarchy and that power can be exercised by managers by employing various resources to impose discipline (Goldthorpe and Hope, 1974).

In addition, Townley cites Zuboff's (1988) portrayal of the appraisal as an 'information panopticon' as a means of evidence gathering, and consequently creating a managerial structure. Such practices are described as diminishing collegiality and emphasising managerial forms of supervisor, monitor and evaluator. Gibbs (2003) emphasises that devolution adds to the level of power and control that managers can wield and clearly the appraisal reinforces such perceptions.

Discussions around power cannot be thoroughly addressed without discussing authority; Townley (1993) describes power as the analogue of authority. Power within organisations is often conceptualised in implicit terms. Foucauldian depictions of power suggest that power is only seen when it is "discharged" (Townley, 1993) and Lukes (2005) portrayal of power is described as "murky", and difficult to observe. Indeed, Lukes suggests that power is concerned with a control of the organisational agenda and clearly linked to notions of domination. Such domination means that actors, often unwittingly, follow managerial dictates that are against their own interests and compromise their autonomy. Townley (1993) too suggests that there is potential for domination and control to be exercised under a guises of efficiency. Power then appears to be an opaque phenomenon, and arguably, deliberately so (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). Mullins (1985) suggests that power relations are "written out of the

picture” within organisational discourse, presumably as a consequence of connotations relating to dominance and control.

Bach (2005) explains how surveillance practices have resulted in performance management permeating the public sector. In the context of scrutiny at organisational and institutional level it is posited that that appraisal and performance management constructs are clear evidence of management control over the workforce, seeking compliance under a guise of risk reduction (Walle and Roberts, 2008). Control and surveillance processes have seen workers lose autonomy and skills due to the sub-division of the labour process. Truss *et al.*, (1997, p.53), support this view in their depiction of HRM practices:

“That the rhetoric adopted by the companies frequently embraces the tenets of the soft, commitment model, while the reality experienced by employees is more concerned with strategic control, similar to the hard model.”

Manufacturing and call centre environments have been particularly predisposed to control and surveillance techniques as have organisation such as Amazon, in the drive for performance efficiency (Rosenblat, *et al.*, 2014). However, evidence of performance management, surveillance and control is now prevalent in academia with evidence of increased scrutiny of lecturing staff (Deem and Brehony, 2005) and of doctors within the NHS (Chamberlain, 2010). Prowse and Prowse, (2010) cite evidence of public services using appraisal, as a method of control in the pursuit of managerial objectives. Townley (1993) questions the ethics of intense scrutiny of individual working practices and behaviour. Directly addressing appraisal she suggests that the implicit assumption of objective information, external to appraiser



and appraise, but understood and discerned by the appraiser begins to structure asymmetrical relationships, which inhibit scope for autonomy and aid control over work. The appraisal, far from being a one off event is permanently present and individuals are rendered in a constant state of not knowing if they are under surveillance or not, once again reifying notions of control:

“Although operating through visibility, as a technology of power its effects remain largely invisible. It is the exercise of control, a method by which the powerful are helped to observe the less powerful but rarely, it must be noted, vice versa” (Townley, 1993, p.233).

The management by objectives literature, which reifies managerial control of the agenda, appears to support this position (Martinez, 2001 and Kennedy and Porter, 2008). Consequently, the developmental aspect of the performance appraisal is reduced or ignored, rewarding only those that conform to prescribed objectives, which in turn appears to fail to address wider areas of organisational and individual performance (Prowse and Prowse, 2010a). In addition, Prowse and Prowse (2010b) suggest that the performance management literature does little to report issues of employee resistance. It also fails to adequately recognise the role of trade unions in opposition to attempts to exert control over professionals and staff within the appraisal process. This inevitably raises questions of conflict and resistance and this is now explored in more detail.

## **2.6 The Nuances of Workplace Conflict**

Over the last 20 years, attention regarding workplace conflict has primarily been concerned with organisational costs both in terms of the management of conflict, and the impact such issues have on organisational performance (Saundry and Wibberley,

2014). There are numerous factors which have arguably shaped conflict in the HE sector. NPM has exposed public sector organisations to increasingly managerialist ideologies; with neoliberal practices permeating the public sector, resulting in an increasing reliance on, and scrutiny of performance metrics at the micro and macro level (See Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 2004; Hood, 2007). The higher education sector is not immune from such changes and the previous sections have explained the range of metrics which are associated with university performance. The Skills and Employment Survey of 2012 suggests that employees are now increasingly fearful of dismissal, discrimination and victimisation since 2000 and describe a rise in anxiety in public sector workers (Gallie, *et al.*, 2012 cited in Saundry *et al.*, 2014). Indeed Gallie, (*et al.*, 2012) also identify changes in attitudes of employees within the public sector in comparison to their private sector counterparts:

“In the past both fear of job loss and fear of unfair treatment at work were far more common in the private than in the public sector. In 2012 fear of job loss was higher in the public than in the private sector, while fear of unfair treatment had become more similar to the level in the private sector. Fear of status loss was also higher in the public sector.” (p.1)

Given the changes that have occurred in the public sector (change having been identified by Gallie *et al.*, as a cause of concern) and the government drive for efficiency leading to a reduction in the public service (Gallie *et al.*, cite a lack of security and fear of unemployment as a key source of anxiety) these findings are perhaps unsurprising.

Following a survey of 2,195 UK employees on their experiences of conflict, Gifford (2015) identified that four in ten UK employees report some form of interpersonal

conflict, either as “an isolated dispute or incident of conflict and/or an ongoing difficult relationship” (p.2). Furthermore, one in four UK employees reported that conflict is a common occurrence in their organisation. This clearly evidences the scale of workplace conflict within UK organisations. The findings also reveal that conflict is most common with one’s line manager. Additionally, the research found that the most common cause of conflict were differences in personality or working style (a relational view) but also found that issues around individual performance and target setting were also important. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that issues associated with the line manager are rife within organisations as they inevitably control workload allocation, provide objectives and set deadlines, all of which controls employee behaviour and impacts upon individual autonomy.

It is important at this juncture to recognise the variance in perceptions and definitions of conflict. The continuum ranges from visible, formally expressed episodes, to those issues which are more opaque. Purcell’s (2014) observation regarding the way in which organisations portray conflict is of interest and worthy of attention. Purcell addresses the complex issue of employee engagement and highlights the work of Kenney (2014) who evidences that 56 per cent of employees within Gallup Business Journal (2012) research were considered to be “not-engaged”. Kenney (2014, cited in Purcell, 2014, p.243) describes such staff as “...essentially ‘checked out’. They are sleep walking through their workday, putting time – but not energy or passion – into their work”. A further fifteen percent are reported as “actively disengaged”, these staff are unhappy at work and “act out their unhappiness”. The majority of staff are therefore, in this study at least, disengaged. Purcell explains that this disengagement is actually evidence of *conflict* at work, which is reframed as disengagement. This more ambiguous form of conflict, which will presumably not be accounted for in

disciplinary and grievance terms, is of interest in this research, particularly given the potential resistance from academics towards performance management practices.

Indeed, Goddard (2014, p.11) suggests that conflicts are: “attributable to individual self-seeking and assumed to be solved by aligning individual goals with those of the organisation through various incentive schemes”. This alignment of individual and organisational goals, and notions of incentives are clearly alluding to the use of appraisal, and performance management practices. Purcell (2014) contends that organisational approaches to individualising issues of motivation and control through performance management practices, or through remedies including selection and training is:

“...a dangerous reduction of work relations to individual attributes and failings, showing no recognition of interpersonal and systemic conflict nor the conditions which lead to conflict and its variation between organisations and contracts” (p.244).

Therefore by personalising issues to individuals, organisations fail to acknowledge wider issues of conflict within the organisation. Purcell therefore argues that conflict is airbrushed out of the picture and organisations instead prefer to focus on issues of (dis)-engagement

Section 2.5 tackled the complex terrain of domination and control. In contrast to this topics of resistance are considered, with Foucault suggesting that the interplay between power and resistance relies on organisations finding new ways to exercise power, and Weber describing power as the exercising of will, despite resistance (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). In contemporary workplaces, such resistance is likely to manifest itself in the form of conflict and perhaps result in union action and

grievances. Taylor (2013) provides a useful critical summary of the performance management literature and highlights the language used within the discourse as being developmental and supportive, and that objectives should be agreed and shared. Citing the work of Armstrong (2009), Taylor provides an insight into the way in which the management literature suggests issues of underperformance is addressed. It is posited that this should be a:

“Positive process that is based on feedback throughout the year and looks forward to what can be done by individuals to overcome performance problems and, importantly, how managers can provide support and help.”

Armstrong, 2009, p.634)

Despite such assertions in the performance management literature, it is interesting to note that issues of underperformance within organisations appear to be addressed using a more punitive and even disciplinary process (Taylor, 2013). Returning to the topic of agreement, Grint (1992) highlights the recognition amongst appraisee's that they need to continue to work with their appraiser *after* the appraisal, meaning that true agreement might not be attainable, presumably due to the asymmetrical relationships within appraisal constructs described by Townley (1993).

The increased management of performance is viewed paradoxically in organisations, depending on the position and function of respondents. Saundry *et al.*, (2016) report that HR practitioners view the tighter management of performance positively and perceive this as line managers finally addressing issues of underperformance (and absence) as an action which is long overdue, and additionally view conflict as an inevitable consequence as managers are no longer shying away from difficult issues. Grint's (1992) assessment of appraisal speaks to this view, as he reports HR

managers as “favourably inclined” (P.62) to appraisal and line managers being less so. Culturally, it could be posited that staff in public sector organisations had previously not been exposed to, or used to having their performance and attendance managed, and that it was the change in treatment, rather than the treatment itself being a cause for conflict. Indeed, Saundry, *et al.*, (2016) attest to this, citing that staff found it difficult to meet the new standards expected, or perceived these as unfair. The findings also present that, whilst the issues are not confined to the public sector, that they are more acute than in the private or not-for-profit sector. Furthermore, the research reported agreement between managers and HR practitioners that poor performance management could lead to cases of bullying.

Performance management systems in isolation might not be responsible for cases of conflict. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007b, p.10) explain that “there can be a wide gap between policy and practice that is partly attributable to poor line management behaviour”. As previously addressed, some managers lack the appropriate skills and find it hard to differentiate between “good” and “bad” performance, or dislike having a “difficult conversation”. Additionally, it is important not to narrow the focus of conflict towards those issues that reach the point of early conciliation or employment tribunal, this would be remiss and fail to address underlying issues of conflict, which impact upon both employee wellbeing and attendance, but also organisational performance and productivity.

This highlights the role of line managers in relation to conflict. Teague and Roche (2012) explain that whilst organisations view line managers as playing a significant role in the management of workplace conflict, they lack organisational support and appropriate training (as already discussed above). However, there are other factors which might also mitigate line manager’s ability to successfully resolve conflict.

Organisational pressures have been found to lead to line managers paying less attention to their HR duties both because of HR role overload (Gilbert, et al., 2011), to ensure work tasks are completed (Teague and Roche, 2012) and in order to pursue short term performance goals (Perry and Kulik, 2008). More specifically, Saundry and Wibberley, (2014) highlight a lack of self-confidence in managers in dealing with conflict.

In the context of performance appraisals, Grote (1996) found that managers inflated performance ratings as a means of avoiding conflict with their staff. This is a compelling finding. If managers seek to actively avoid conflict themselves, and lack confidence in their ability, the extent to which managers might intervene effectively in matters of conflict is surely a source of debate. When attempts are made, the success of those interventions might also be questionable due to the aforementioned lack of training and organisational support. Renwick (2003, cited in Perry and Kulik, 2008) reported that line managers were eager to take on HR responsibilities, but often completed these inadequately and regularly by-passed procedures. The fairness and consistency with which employees were treated was also called into question. The devolvement of responsibility to managers without appropriate training, guidance and monitoring therefore presents opportunities for conflict to arise, particularly if individuals perceive their treatment to be inequitable or unfair.

In this context it is not surprising that evidence suggests that the line manager-employee relationship remains the crucible of workplace conflict and that this is most often exposed in relation to performance issues. Van Wanrooy et al.'s (2013) analysis of WERS2011 found that grievances raised between 2004 and 2011 using formal procedures had remained comparatively static at 18 and 19 per cent respectively. However, 'Unfair treatment by managers or supervisors' was the source of the majority

of grievances. In the context of this research, 39 percent of managers that reported a grievance suggested that employee concerns relating to victimisation or concerns relating to treatment during performance appraisals were one of the causes. 30 per cent of managers cited issues relating to pay, terms and conditions, whilst 23 per cent of managers reported grievances due to bullying and harassment at work from colleagues or supervisors.

Whilst the findings of the WERS survey (2011) are useful, further qualitative investigation is required to develop a deeper understanding regarding the scope and nature of conflict at an individual level. Forth and Dix (2016) attest to the lack of extensive depth and detail in many of the studies which predominantly rely on survey-based ratings, which whilst of value, do not provide a richness of detail in terms of specific factors which underpin issues of conflict.

The literature review to date has outlined the origins of the current focus on performance management and has explored both the prescriptive and critical literature that has examined the way in which performance is managed in practice. This has suggested not only that this a potential source of conflict but that it can only be understood with reference to notions of power, authority and control. The final section of the review now examines how these issues are played out in Higher Education.



## **CHAPTER THREE: PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **3.0 Introduction**

Chapter two provided a detailed examination of the performance management literature. The prescriptive literature was discussed, and the impact of new public management was described. The chapter then engaged in critical examination of the literature and addressed issues of power, control and authority. Furthermore it addressed a number of complexities and challenges for effective performance management, including managerial competence, and the potential for conflict to manifest itself in the workplace as a consequence of greater scrutiny of performance.

This chapter will locate these issues with a specific focus on HE context. The chapter will consider the impact of new public management on the HE sector, before providing a detailed examination of the academic environment (3.2). Section 3.2 will explore the complexities of performance management in higher education, and consider issues of autonomy and collegiality. Section 3.3 considers the importance of organisational status and section 3.4 describes the challenges that organisational structures within HE often present. Furthermore, the challenges of accurately measuring performance within the ambiguous HE setting will be discussed. The chapter will highlight implications for performance management within the unique academic environment, and assess the potential for conflict, in a range of forms. The chapter will finish with a depiction of the conceptual framework which guided this research.

### **3.1 NPM in Higher Education**

There are numerous examples of performance indicators using NPM doctrines; these include targets, ranking, tables and intelligence (Hood, 2007). These tools of measurement and evaluation are clearly present within higher education. These have

prevailed due to a number of factors, not least due to the reform of the sector (Martin and Sauvegeot, 2011) but also due to the marketization, globalisation, and massification of academia (Chan, 2004; Giannakis, 2015). To contextualise the rate of growth within the sector, The 'Dearing Report' (1997) argued that 50% of 18-30 year olds should engage in Higher Education by 2020 (David *et al.*, 2008).

Reduced regulation has spawned new providers and increased competition. The free-market ideology described by Glynn and Murphy, (2008) can clearly be seen in the higher education sector, both in terms of student (consumer) choice and in relation to market forces driving accountability. Middlehurst and Teixeira (2012) also describe the neo-liberal approaches to marketization that have been widely adopted in academia. Watermeyer and Hedgecoe, (2016) reports that HE institutions have been vigorously pursued in recent years by HE policy makers, regulators and funders, with demands for increased visibility, transparency and accountability. Both Watermeyer and Broucker, *et al.*, (2018) lament the narrow focus on performance efficiency and measurement against KPI's and league table rankings as obscuring the wider purpose and socio-economic benefit of Universities. Whilst the value of metrics and data cannot be ignored, it is important that this evidence is placed into a wider context around the role and purpose of universities.

The extent to which data is now utilised in HE is clearly evident. Performance data *can* be used to inform rational decision-making, but is also frequently used to evidence performance to key stakeholders and wider audiences on the state of HE (Martin and Sauvegeot, 2011). League table performance, particularly around the NSS, TEF and REF are used in promotional and marketing activities in an effort to recruit an increasingly demanding and consumerist student populace. The increased use of performance data can clearly be traced to notions of NPM, neo-liberalisation and de-

regulation of the sector and to marketization and choice, especially since the removal of the student number cap. Watermayer (2016, p.652) describes the increased use of such systems as intended to “produce more easily evaluated, immediate and immediately recognisable results and benefits”. Martin and Sauvegeot, (2011, p.21) cite the work of HEFCE (1999) who assert that their purpose and function within the sector is:

“to provide better and more reliable information on the performance of the sector; to allow comparison between individual institutions; to enable institutions to benchmark their own performance; to inform policy developments; and to contribute to the public accountability of higher education”

A thorough interrogation of the evolution of performance indicators within the sector is beyond the scope of this thesis. Fast forward to 2018 and a plethora of institutional and sectoral targets are prevalent; the most regularly cited include, but are not limited to the following:

- The Research Excellence Framework

The framework is designed to monitor the policy goal of research excellence within the sector. The framework assesses the quality of research in UK HE Institutions (REF, 2014). The four higher education funding bodies, the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) , the Scottish Funding council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL) use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their grant for research to the institutions which they fund. Additionally, the assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and

produces evidence of the benefits of this investment. Finally, assessment outcomes provide valuable benchmarking information and evidence the reputation of institutions whom contribute to the REF (REF, 2014). Reporting on this performance is one of a number of tools institutions utilise to market themselves within the competitive HE sector.

- The Teaching Excellence Framework

Similar to the REF, the TEF focusses on the monitoring and assessment of Teaching in UK institutions. The Government has stated that the TEF will aim to ensure that students receive an excellent teaching experience and build a culture where teaching has as equal status and recognition to research. The TEF should provide students with information to enable them to judge teaching quality, recognise institutions that welcome students from diverse backgrounds and promote their retention and progression, and finally, should provide a clear set of criteria and performance metrics (Times Higher Education, 2015).

- The National Student Survey

The National Student Survey targets final year students and is used as a means to gather impressions of students regarding their courses and learning experience using a Likert-scale ranging from Definitely Agree, Mostly Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Mostly Agree, Definitely Agree and Not Applicable. NSS scores play a key role in determining position in a range of published league tables and have become critical to student recruitment strategies.

The intensified scrutiny of metrics and league table by a range of stakeholders and policy makers, as a direct consequence of the NPM paradigm, has clear implications for the way in which universities are increasingly managed. Shepherd (2018) provides

a detailed account of the rise of managerialism in university settings, and suggests that vice-chancellors and pro-vice chancellors accept the idea that management is necessary and beneficial, whilst providing evidence of management becoming a discrete function in universities. The following sections explore the impact of NPM and managerial systems in an academic context, and describes the complexity of performance management in such an environment.

### **3.2 The Academic Environment**

The management of academic performance is complex for a variety of reasons. Broad and Goddard, (2012) describe higher education as complex and cultural, and cite the prevalence of autonomy within the sector as a cause of specific challenges, which do not present themselves in traditional private sector businesses. Whilst performance management principles within the sector have undoubtedly intensified (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2009), these are somewhat paradoxical when contextualised against a long held value system of academic freedom that still prevails in the sector.

The established culture of collegiality and autonomy within the HE sector presents numerous challenges for performance management systems. Notions of control, measurement and surveillance are in stark contrast to traditional and long-held academic beliefs that they should be afforded, for the most part, professional sovereignty. Waller (2004, P.8) explains the impact of the changing culture from one of collegiality, to one of increased accountability within the sector:

“On some college campuses and in some departments, this culture of collegiality is still quite strong (Birnbaum, 1988). After all, chairs and deans who are evaluating their colleagues today will most likely return to the ranks of the department and be evaluated, possibly by those same colleagues, in

a few years. This recycling encourages evaluations that avoid confrontation and accountability (Mills and Hyle, 1999). However, the sub-culture of collegiality is being challenged today by one of accountability.”

More recent changes since Waller’s 2004 publication, such as the aforementioned massification of the sector, increased competition, and fee changes in the UK context have surely compounded these issues. It is of note that that post-1992 institutions display a more managerialist ethos than presented by Waller (2004), with permanent directorates rather than the rotating managers of pre-1992 institutions (Barnett and Di Napoli, 2009). Shepherd (2018) explains that managerialism has grown in university settings, with discrete roles for management, and that specialist managers are being recruited from other sectors in professional services settings. Interestingly, this is not the case for academic management, although greater attention is paid to managerial competence (at the level of the VC at least). “PVCs remain almost exclusively career academics. The evidence thus reflects a higher education-specific form of managerial ideology that might be described as ‘academic-managerialism” (p.1676).

Egginton (2010) contends that academic staff have traditionally enjoyed high levels of independence and have been comparatively free of any sense of management. Contextualising the changes in academia over the last 10 years, Egginton explains that levels of scrutiny, regulation and expectation have increased from a variety of stakeholders including government, students and other customers. Winter (2009, p.121) asserts that NPM has “reshaped all aspects of academic work and identity around an idealised image of corporate efficiency...” This reshaping has led to a clash of cultures and identities within institutions; these must surely have implications for the performance management process. Academic managers construct goals and working patterns which lend themselves to the achievement of KPI’s, utilising corporate,

hierarchical management systems. This approach is incongruent with the 'managed academic', who defend their own professional identity and promote self-regulation and collegiality in opposition to what is described as the "Taylorisation" of academic labour (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996).

The academic labour process is worthy of detailed attention. Beverungen, (2011, p.254) defines labour process theory as "an approach to the historical and contemporary study of work under capitalism emanating from Marx". Braverman (1974) made a key contribution to debates around labour process theory, and in doing so reified Marx's critique of capitalism (Spencer, 2000). Braverman cited the refinement of work as a means of generating "surplus" in capitalist terms, suggesting that surplus generation was dependent on the erosion of worker control of the labour process. The academic environment has been subject to debates around labour process, and has not been immune from efforts to reduce worker control. Dearlove (1997) describes the nature of academic work, what he termed as "craft work", requiring imagination, ideas and experience. Furthermore he suggests that good researchers must be self-motivated and curiosity driven, and act almost as if they were self-employed. These characteristics mean that the creativity required is not something that can be "delivered to management order" (p.57). Furthermore, Dearlove explains that elite institutions had little interest in controlling attendance or hours of work and consequently supported notions of autonomy. Underpinning this autonomy was a strong sense of collegial relations and peer control, which, when combined with self-regulation provided little room for management. He recognises that this was the case at a time when universities were well-resourced, elite institutions. Charting the significant changes in the HE sector which have redefined academic labour, Dearlove highlights the mass market of higher education, the emergence of

“new” (post-92) universities, and the greater concern for their economic contribution, coupled with changes in funding. These factors as well as increased competition, have led to intensified attempts to manage academic work, and a substantial shift towards increased control of academic labour. This view finds significant support from Mather and Seifert (2011) who cite neo-liberal approaches to the management of public services, seeking greater efficiency and value for money, as leading to greater control of labour by management, and freedom being taken away from professional individuals. Mather and Seifert (2011) describe the increasing use of performance management as a means to control and coerce, and cite the labour of academics as being a particular target for increased management. They describe academic labour as being “labour-intense” and highlight the view that management believe, through a process of “deprofessionalisation”, and work intensification that efficiency can be improved. These views are supported by Dominelli and Hoogvelt, (1996), and Macfarlane (2011) who reports the “unbundling” of the academic all-rounder, who finds their role reduced to a more limited set of tasks. This limitation arguably provides heightened control and measurement of performance, and reduces the sense of self-regulation of those who self-ascribe as professionals (Mather and Seifert, 2011). Mather, *et al.*, (2007) cite numerous recent studies from Bryson, (2004) and Reid, (2003) and summarise that “a relocation of job controls in managers’, rather than workers’ hands” (p.113) has resulted from free-market logic. This reduction of individual control has corresponded with attempts to illuminate the academic labour process, and increase accountability, through teaching observations and interest in student feedback. In the HE context, Dearlove (1997) also highlights the increasing regulation of the sector, which today takes the form of the bodies such as the QAA and HEFCE, and the rise of metrics such as the REF. Chapter two of this thesis



highlighted the impact of such bodies, and the importance placed upon league table performance. Inevitably, the use of control mechanisms in response to these metrics have reduced the autonomy that teaching staff are afforded. Dearlove contends that collegiality has also reduced and that managerialism has eroded professionalism and self-management. It is argued that management, and the rise of managerialism has brought about far greater control of the workforce, and what Dearlove terms as the “proletarianisation” of academic work. Increased consumerism and choice of students and the impact of timetables and monitoring of productivity and quality have all shaped the academic labour process, and reinforced power relations and hierarchy between management and employees (Mather and Seifert, 2011). There is degree of acceptance that academic work requires greater co-ordination, as the sector has moved from elite to mass-market. Concern for teaching quality, and external regulation, has also led to institutional assurance mechanisms and concern for fair teaching loads (Dearlove, 1997). Yet Mather and Seifert, (2011) report increased accusations of bullying and a rise in grievances as staff rally against the imposition of control mechanisms (such as performance management and appraisal) and the associated reduction in academic freedom. Opposition is also controlled, either through rewarding compliance through promotion, or through the weeding out of staff who do not fit into the new academic environment. Clearly, attempts to change the academic labour process, has had a range of consequences, and seen conflict from those academics intent on trying to maintain the status quo, and resist efforts to intensify scrutiny of their practice.

This cultural clash is understandable given the pace and frequency of change within the HE environment, not least the aforementioned marketization, massification and globalisation of the sector (Chan, 2004; Giannakis, 2015) and moreover, due to

institutional responses to increased tuition fees, described as the single event which has had the greatest impact on the HE landscape (Temple, *et al.*, 2014).

These changes have unsurprisingly led to institutional reactions as a means of remaining competitive in the market place. Modern corporate cultures and traditional academic cultures have therefore inevitably clashed, due to the actors involved pursuing different values and outcomes (Winter, 2009). Schein (2010) explains that organisational culture is formed over a prolonged period of time, is based on *shared* values and assumptions and is affected by the external environment. In academic settings, cultures of collegiality and freedom have been established for decades. Clearly the external environment, that of fee changes, removal of the student number cap, increased competition, and student choice, present fertile ground for established values and assumptions to be challenged, and threatened. Whilst the organisational culture discourse is far more complex than this brief description, it serves to evidence how culture can potentially impede the utilisation of performance management practices.

In addition to the traditional autonomous nature of academic work, relationships within the sector have historically been cultivated through notions of collegiality. Interestingly, Hull (2006) discusses the passing or deterioration of collegiality within the academic community in the context of the adoption of formal workload allocation models within UK institutions. In the 12 years since this publication it is reasonable to posit that the direction of travel has been away from established collegial relationships. Nonetheless, the sector has enjoyed and arguably continues to enjoy comparative collegiality. Bennett, *et al.*, (2003) explain that 'new' UK universities (post 1992) are more hierarchical in nature than traditional, established institutions. In particular, they

point to a top-down appraisal system conducted by the line manager. Simmons and Iles (2001, p.4) explain that:

“Old universities adopted a laissez-faire approach to performance management. They operated on a “high trust” basis with an ethos that emphasised independence thought and scholarship, academic freedom and collegiality. The “high trust” mode of operation meant academic staff were not closely monitored or assessed”

However, the changing HE environment outlined so far in this literature review threatens to disturb this established order. Tomlinson, (2014) recognises that new market frameworks and increased financial contributions have raised student expectations of higher education and make them less tolerant of poor standards. The study provides an insight into the way fees impact upon student perceptions:

“Wanting value for money and to experience a service that is commensurate to the private contributions students make towards higher education is an inevitable by-product of a market-driven system that actively positions students as paying customers. However, it does not necessarily always translate into students’ actual behaviours and relationships with their institutions.”

(Tomlinson, 2014, p.42)

Winter, (2009) explains that students are increasingly referred to as customers and courses described as products. This represents a distinct cultural shift for academic staff (Brennan and Eagle, 2007) and a challenge for HE institutions, and those in management positions, to contextualize the notion of students as customers if they are to engage the academic workforce meaningfully (Bowden, 2011). The

marketization of the sector and the increased emphasis on league tables means that performance of academic staff and the academic labour process generally is prone to greater scrutiny.

A further complication within the sector is that of identity schism (Winter, 2009). Academic managers may not actually want to take on management responsibilities nor view themselves as managers once they have received academic promotion and view such activities as entities that take time away from teaching and research (Winter, 2009). This issue is not one that is confined to academia, Hutchinson and Purcell (2010) identified that ward managers in the NHS faced issues of role ambiguity and role conflict when faced with delivering HRM activities. Broadbent, (2007b) explains that despite the more intensive controls available to academic managers, their reluctance to implementing managerialist ideologies remains. As performance management constructs are supposed to be owned and driven by the line manager (Armstrong, 2006; Decramer, et al., 2012), there are obvious implications for delivery of performance systems, given that the actors involved might not actually view themselves as managers nor wish to accept their responsibilities as such.

Another factor, which potentially confuses matters in academia, is not only the prevailing collegiate and autonomous cultures described, but also the prominence of organisational status, which has the potential to impact upon meaningful performance discussions.

### **3.3 Status**

The status-laden nature of academia also contributes to the complexity of managing performance, and to the unique environment within HE. Sauder, *et al.*, (2012) contend that status signals the particular category that an individual or an organization

occupies within a well-defined social hierarchy. This literature review will focus on the topic of individual status, but before doing so, it is important to address the notion of hierarchy in this context. Whilst authority (according to Weber) is located within a visible hierarchy, a social hierarchy is arguably less clear and can be related to social capital. Bordieu describes social capital in terms of “honour and prestige” (Treibel, 2006, p.231) whilst Lippuner, (2012, cited in Kapferer *et al.*, 2014) explains that those whom enjoy social capital experience additional benefits in terms of their reputation and the freedom that they are afforded.

The notion of status is hard to define, and its usage within empirical research is often critiqued; furthermore, the ability to distinguish between subjective evaluations of status and objective evaluations is problematic (Piazza and Castellucci, 2014). Weber (1978) suggests that power, wealth and status are the foundations for social inequality. Status can be conceived of as a relationship between social groups, such as status differentials between occupations (Ridgeway and Erickson, 2000) or as part of a hierarchical relationship (Skvoretaz and Farraro, 1996).

Within an academic context, Macfarlane (2011) explains that status and identity is closely related to research and scholarly activities. Professors enjoy a high level of status and identity as a consequence of their position, although in academic settings, the marriage of status and hierarchy is complex. Piazza and Castellucci (2014) explain that interest in status dynamics are renewed as these are seen as a means of explaining phenomena such as discrimination, alliance formation and organisational change. Given the status laden academic environment, this assertion is of particular interest. For performance management practices to be successfully enacted, managers require the authority to do so effectively, however, the interplay between

status and authority within in such a setting is an area of interest for this research to explore.

Organisational structure can contribute to notions of status (Skvoretaz and Farraro, 1996) and to issues of authority, according to Weber (1978). However, structures in academia present a variety of challenges for the effective management of performance, these issues are discussed below.

### **3.4 Structure**

Smart and Paulsen (2012) point out that universities are increasingly using matrix structures (see also Savin-Baden, 2000). Such structures are often used to maintain a balance between disciplinary groupings and the need for multi-disciplinary courses (Rees and Porter, 2004). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of a matrix structure in a modern university. These structures require course leaders (or programme leaders depending on the institutional language) to build contributions from individual modules (and module leaders) into a cohesive programme of study. Whilst course leaders have responsibility for this co-ordination, they often do not have any tangible authority over those individuals whose modules they rely on for their programme. Rees and Porter (2004, p.192) explain this as follows:

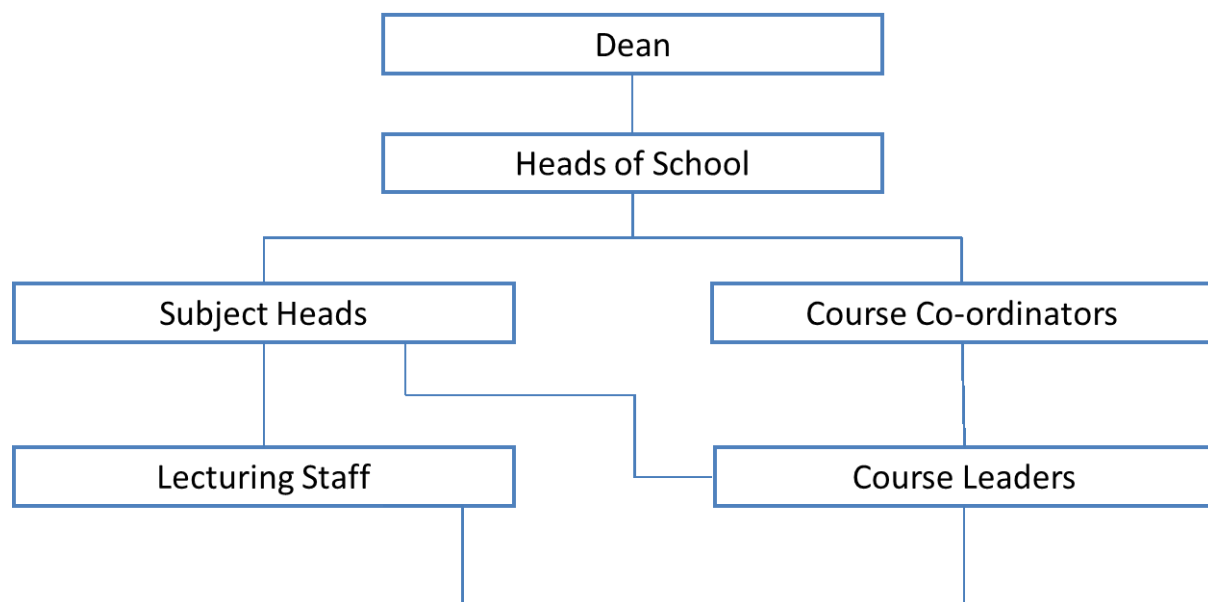
“The leaders of multi-disciplinary teams in matrix structures are not likely to have any formal authority or much in the way of rewards or sanctions over their team members...”

The lack of traditional line management responsibility and authority within matrix structures means that co-ordinators have little or no authority over those whose activities they are required to co-ordinate. Rees and Porter (2004) contend that such positions are often not recognised in terms of status or monetary reward, and that if

senior managers wish such structures to function efficiently, then they should ensure that leaders are supported, recognised and rewarded. The following passage from their work had particular resonance in the context of this research thesis:

“Course leaders in a department were blamed by senior management for not controlling their teams strongly. There was a failure to appreciate the basic organisational point that course leaders were not the line managers of the staff who had been allocated to them.”

Rees and Porter (2004, p.192)



**Figure 2 A Matrix Structure in HE, Adapted from Rees and Porter (2004)**

Within such structures problems will also escalate to managers who may not be aware of or have expertise in the subject discipline. Performance appraisal presents many challenges to managers in organisations with traditional, hierarchical relationships (Prowse and Prowse, 2010; Mello, 2014). In academic settings, where manager-subordinate relationships are less clear, these problems are amplified.

Meanwhile, the dominant HRM literature, particularly that which addresses performance management, generally assumes that organisations take a top-down approach, utilising hierarchical structures (Kennedy and Porter, 2008; Prowse and Prowse, 2009). For example, Armstrong (2006) explains that senior managers should articulate the organisations mission, objectives and values and CIPD (2015) describe the role of line managers in setting and reviewing objectives and providing appraisal ratings for staff. However, Decramer, *et al.*, (2012a) posit that this top-down approach is one which is not appreciated by the academic community, largely due to the aforementioned incongruence with notions of autonomy within the sector. They also argue that the absence of professional line managers in HE may make it difficult to develop and imbed performance management systems. Clearly, the structures in place within universities are problematic for performance management.

These findings present real issues for the management of performance within the sector. Staff within the hierarchy either don't have sufficient authority to tackle issues (Rees and Porter, 2004), don't view themselves, or wish to be viewed by others as managers (Winter, 2009) and often adopt a laissez-faire approach to management (Simmons and Iles, 2001).

### **3.5 The Challenge of Performance Measurement**

Broadbent (2007) describes the management of academic staff as troublesome, not only due to their description as autonomous professionals, but also due to the difficulty in applying control and measurement where outputs are difficult to define. Despite the vast array of targets described within this literature review, translating these areas of organisational performance to departmental and individual level appears to be problematic. Broadbent (2007) identifies the complex nature of academic work as a



causal factor in managing performance, citing an individual's ability to teach and inspire students as one example of relative performance ambiguity. The TEF might provide a series of metrics (as suggested in their objectives) but currently such decisions and opinions are inherently subjective. This subjectivity can create tensions and an environment of dissatisfaction and conflict could consequently develop.

There are however some measures of performance that could be utilised in order to gather a clearer picture of performance. The literature suggests that the use of 360 degree appraisals enables the mitigation of bias and subjectivity that evaluation from a single source provides (Lepsinger and Lucia, 2009). Peer reviews within academia are frequently utilised, and these evaluations provide an additional point of reference for the assessment of teaching performance. Bingham and Ottewill, (2001, cited in Blackmore, 2005) suggest that peer reviews should link to staff appraisal and development activity. It is perhaps this linkage that needs to be addressed as anecdotal evidence suggests that peer review and performance appraisal remain separate and therefore opportunities for evidenced based discussions are missed.

This is particularly true if reviewers do not hold management roles and responsibilities and therefore do not seek additional evidence of performance. Citing the work of Sholtes (1993), Blackmore (2005) warns that the peer review process is one which can potentially undermine notions of teamwork, consequently, Bingham and Ottewill (2001, cited in Blackmore, 2005) suggest that peer assessment can be too self-congratulatory and therefore be of little critical value. Blackmore's research also suggested that the behaviour and performance of the actor being reviewed was affected due to the presence of a reviewer. The purpose (and historical context) of peer reviews suggests that these might be performed to satisfy QAA audits that such

activities were taking place in institutions. This calls into question the benefits of such a review process to the individual's development.

Perhaps most interestingly of all in the context of this research, is that the peer review does not always contribute to a meaningful discussion during the performance appraisal. Peer reviews are also inherently subjective, depending on individual's perceptions and values. Like 360 degree appraisal though, they do offer opinion from more than one source.

Module evaluations provide another source of evidence which could potentially be used as an indicator of performance. However, Times Higher Education (2014) challenge this, pointing out that response rates are often poor and samples are self-selecting. Furthermore, feedback ratings differ if they are sought before rather than after results publication. In fact, some argue that rather than there being a link between student satisfaction and good academic performance, the exact opposite is true (Inge, 2018). Therefore those with low student satisfaction, could arguably be the best teachers. Moore and Kuol (2005) synthesise a range of critiques around student evaluation, questioning the validity of student feedback and whether or not results are more about personality or popularity as opposed to teaching performance. Furthermore, the use of module evaluations appear problematic when several members of teaching staff are involved, as often individual performance is difficult to identify.

Broad and Goddard, (2012) explain that they identified little evidence of internal performance metrics being constantly monitored and evaluated or of action plans being developed at the academic department level. While there are a wide range of institutional performance metrics, there appears to be some difficulty in translating and

interpreting these into meaningful and tangible objectives for individuals. This presents a challenge for the appraisee in evidencing their performance, but also presents a climate for subjectivity, assumptions and bias for managers, whom do not have sufficient data to make informed, evidenced based decisions for appraisal feedback and ratings. The absence of data and authority potentially allows those with status to dominate performance discussions.

Decramer *et al.*, (2012a; 2012b) describe numerous issues in relation to the measurement of academic performance in higher education. These include the assertion that the use of a single generic performance management system for all employees should be applied with caution. Furthermore, that:

“Academic employees have the freedom to set their own priorities and goals according to criteria set by their disciplines rather than by the institutional needs of their employing organisations” (Harley *et al.*, 2004, cited in Decramer, *et al.*, 2012b, p.687).

This means that line managers set objectives for academic departments which potentially do not align to wider organisational goals, preventing vertical fit or strategic fit. This also relates to the notion of autonomy with the academic community in terms of academics being permitted to set their own agenda.

Regarding performance management systems at institutional level Broadbent (2007, p7) asserts that:

“...there are huge problems in conceiving of PMS within Universities through the use of an input/process/output model. What we have is a sector that is relatively autonomous, but driven by a series of funding mechanisms

that demand particular outcomes, sometimes producing contradictory demands...”

This section has begun to establish the complex area of measuring performance in the HE sector. It is apparent that there are multiple issues that prevail, not least the limited and ambiguous data than can be applied at an individual level.

### **3.6 The Management of Performance in Higher Education**

Performance appraisal is a process which can be shaped by perceptions of managerial competence and the appraisee’s belief that managers understand their work (Brown, *et al.*, 2010). In the context of appraisals in higher education, we know that academic performance is harder to monitor than would be the case in traditional office settings due to the removed proximity of the reporting manager, furthermore academic labour is opaque in nature (Broadbent, 2007). Those being appraised might therefore be sceptical of the appraisers ability to accurately rate their performance. The critical performance literature recognises that the appraisal is subject to potential rater bias and “similar to me” assertions from managers (Latham, *et al.*, 2008). This subjectivity in the decision making process, (see Prowse and Prowse, 2010a; Asif and Searcy, 2014; Schmidle, 2015) is potentially brought into sharper focus in the context of academia.

There are several reasons for this: First, the desire to maintain collegiate relationships in the sector (Simmons and Iles, 2001; Hull, 2006; Broadbent, 2007b;) could lead to distortion in appraisal ratings (Jawahar and Williams, 1997; Guralnik, *et al.*, 2004). This is often done as a means of avoiding difficult conversations at the appraisal. Second, Winter (2009) attests to the fact that academic managers do not view themselves as such, and therefore might not fulfil their managerial responsibilities.

Those managers that *do* wish to conduct fair and thorough appraisals might be impeded from doing so due to a lack of sufficient management information. Third, Decramer *et al.*, (2012) found that often individual objectives failed to complement or synergise with organisational objectives. Whilst their study inferred that this might be due to academic managers exercising their own autonomy and agenda in setting objectives, an alternative view might be the apparent incompatibility of organisational objectives with those being set for individuals.

Translating organisational objectives into specific, measureable and achievable objectives (pre-requisites for sound objectives according to the abundant literature on the good practice of appraisals) appears problematic. Of the common objectives described earlier perhaps research output (not only using the REF but internal measurement systems) is an area with which measurement can be applied. The TEF *might* provide opportunities to measure teaching, but measurement tools appear to still be in conception and are varied between institutions. Furthermore, The National Student Survey asks several questions that individual academics could reasonably argue are outside of their control. Therefore, applying institutional measures appears difficult for academic managers.

Given the challenges of the appraisal identified thus far, the process seems to require particularly adept managers to use appraisals to motivate, have meaningful conversations and to set and review objectives in a fair and consistent manner. Rees and Porter (2004) contend that promotion and selection of academic staff is often on the basis of research and publications. This is problematic for the academic actors promoted to management level, where a completely different skill set is required. This potential lack of experience is compounded as training is often resented and therefore avoided (Decramer, 2012). Bird (2015, p.83) explains:

“Teaching academics anything is a challenging game, teaching them how to talk to each other can seem insulting. Performance conversations are critical, yet managers shy away from the difficult discussions of behaviour, teaching and research quality, or just working well with colleagues.”

Poorly conceived, ambiguous objectives, discussed during appraisal meetings by potentially inexperienced or under-prepared managers might at best make the appraisal meeting a costly and time wasting exercise. A lack of targets is a direct reflection on the complex nature of academic activity (Broadbent, 2007b). At worst, the subsequent reliance on subjective opinion could cause tension between the parties involved, particularly if preconceptions or biases affect appraisal ratings. There is also potential for poor performance to be missed, or camouflaged if the appraisee is confident in doing so.

The performance appraisal and management of performance is therefore troublesome, and would seem to be highly subjective. Broadbent (2007) attests to the inherent tensions between academic staff who view themselves as professionals and therefore wish to assert (and protect) their autonomy and those who manage them, and consequently are perceived as wishing to reduce this autonomy through control mechanisms. The lack of objective evidence presents a space where issues of authority, power and status become important tenets of performance management.

These tensions are further compounded by external forces within the increasingly globalised market place. Kok, et al., (2010, p.100) explain that “original goals of knowledge generation, progressive inquiry, thought, and debate may have been unconsciously overwhelmed by these new pressing issues of quantified quality”. Additionally, a conflict of interest is described between academics and managers, with

one group focussing on education and the other on budgets. These dichotomies present challenges for the management of academic staff within institutions. In fact there appear to be numerous challenges for those in management positions within HE settings, not least trying to “manage” autonomous and professional individuals in academia, likened to “herding cats” by Broadbent (2007, p.6) but also due to issues of managerial capability. Rees and Porter (2004) report that academics are often promoted to management, despite limited people management capability.

This is due to the fact that contemporary debates around academic promotion criteria are often centred around the tension between research and teaching excellence (Cashmore et al., 2013; Locke, 2014), and there is an apparent absence of discussion around the additional responsibilities and skills required in relation to the management of people, that such promotions might bring. I have 10 years’ experience of managing staff within numerous public sector roles, despite considering myself an experienced and fairly competent manager I view the management of academic staff as challenging in the extreme, not least due to their autonomous nature, but due to the ambiguity that surrounds elements of the role when trying to conceptualise “good performance”. The literature review suggests that across industry, people management skills are undervalued in the recruitment and selection process (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007b; Hales and Rabey, 2011) and there is scant evidence that the situation is any different in the HE sector.

Furthermore, the potential for conflict within the performance management process is clear, particularly if management make attempts to manage what is perceived to be poor performance, or give performance ratings that those actors subject to review perceive as unfair and without reference to clear metrics.

### **3.7 Reactions to Management and Control**

Whilst the evidence of the challenges of, and potential resistant to, performance management thus far appear compelling, Alvesson and Spicer, (2016) provide a detailed account as to why academic staff have offered little resistance, and indeed appear to readily accept managerialist approaches within institutions. Whilst a variety of controls have been imposed, their work suggests that although academics might present disdain for managerial approaches, they are savvy enough to comply in order to achieve promises of upward mobility. The example of research publications into four star journals is cited, with compliance rewarded with promises of promotion:

“Many academics have practically surrendered traditional academic values in favour of commitment to the discipline and instrumentalism of the journal system. As a result, a system aimed at measure and reward quality has been turned into a system of concertive control which academics enforce on each other” (p. 34).

Within the HE context, the adoption of Foucauldian approaches of control and surveillance would appear to inhibit scope for individual autonomy within the labour process and consequently have more negative connotations than Foucault might suggest. However, Harley, et al., (2004) contend that academic employees have the freedom to set their own priorities and goals according to criteria set by their disciplines rather than by the institutional needs of their employing organisations. Furthermore, Kalfa, et al., (2017) explain that the power academics have to resist the negative aspects of performance management is underappreciated. This, coupled with the fact that the academic labour process remains abstruse, means that it is questionable whether most academics would recognise themselves as “docile, useful bodies” (Foucault, 1977, cited in Thompson and McHugh, p131). Nonetheless, even



academic behaviour is arguably controlled and modified through the use of appraisal practices and associated reward. Alvesson and Spicer (2016) highlight the somewhat narrow skill set required to achieve promotion and the financial inducements provided for prolific publishers, which seem to facilitate acceptance and conformity to organisational imperatives. In the context of appraisal, research publications are arguably more tangible elements of the academic role, and teaching performance remains more opaque.

It could be argued that academic perceptions of professional sovereignty (Egginton, 2010) and autonomy (Broadbent, 2007; Winter, 2009; Egginton, 2010) would compound the impact of changing practices. I moved into academia in 2010 and witnessed the “before and after” effects of fee changes in 2012, at institutional, departmental and individual level. More recently I have also witnessed a change in Dean in a faculty within one of the case study institutions. This resulted in staff increasingly required to publish, and for those staff looking to secure positions, this need is of greater significance. The “publish or perish” (Miller, et al., 2011 and Huillier, 2012) culture is not uncommon in HE, but nonetheless represents a change for those individuals who had previously not required a research profile to maintain and develop their academic careers. For those individuals looking to secure employment, the PhD appears to increasingly be viewed as the minimum standard, or entry level requirement, with journal publications the currency in order to succeed in the job market.

The notion of internal competition within institutions seems to be at odds with cherished ideals of collegiality that is widely regarded in the sector (Winter, 2009; Egginton, 2010). Yet this seems to be progressively reflected in the increasing specialisms and narrowing of roles described by Macfarlane, (2007; 2011),

underpinned by the prevalence of reward systems which recognise individualism rather than team work and collaboration (Salaran, 2010). Klingel and Maffie (2011, p.13) contend that:

“The culture of higher education makes the competition-individualism mode of conflict much too prevalent. Faculty often work alone and thus fall into the individualism mode. Individuals, departments, and divisions are often told that the reward structure is a zero- sum game; if department X gets a new system, department Y will not be able to. Thus, much of higher education does not operate in the cooperative, win-win mode.”

Consequently, the traditional university culture is transforming into one which is highly competitive, more managerialist and as a consequence, more hierarchical in nature (Farley and Sprigg, 2014). Whilst Alvesson and Spicer (2016) report some degree of acceptance of greater management and scrutiny of performance, to a large degree this could be explained as academic gaming. Indeed they report that:

“... this compliance is not straight forward. It is riddled with paradoxes such as compliance and resistance; love of academic labour and cynical loathing of it. To cope with these paradoxes, academics begin to see their work as a game which can be played”. (p. 30)

Clearly not all will engage in, nor benefit from this game, and there appears to be clear potential for conflict in the contemporary academic environment. Such issues are addressed in the following section.

### **3.8 The Potential for Conflict in Higher Education**

Research from Klingel and Maffie (2011) and West (2006) suggests that universities may be able to tolerate conflict more readily than other workplaces. They argue that

university environments encourage debate, critique and opposing views, and, according to Klingel and Maffie, (2011) when conflict is unproductive or destructive, the largely isolated nature of academic work somehow makes such issues easier to bear. This is because academics are able to “retreat behind their office doors when conflicts arise with their peers” (p.12). Nonetheless, they accept that economic challenges and increased teaching loads can exacerbate interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, the “qualities” that make universities able to tolerate conflict in times of stability, mean that they are ill equipped to deal with higher levels of conflict in times of pressure.

The changes, or increases in standards and expectations reported within this review seem to speak to the work of Saundry, *et al.*, (2016) and I have borne witness to some of the resentment and concern around attaining the new standards. Furthermore, the notion of autonomy might present issues within the HE setting, particularly during times of change. Saundry and Wibberley, (2014) found that staff whom enjoy comparatively higher levels of autonomy, and access to representation are more likely to raise grievances. Whilst accounts such as that of Alvesson and Spicer (2016) seems to suggest that the erosion of autonomy has been accepted, a more troublesome report is presented from Macfarlane, (2011). His paper presents a compelling case of the disaggregation of the academic function, leading to subdivisions of specialist functions and removing the holistic role of the academic professional. This is characterised by what Macfarlane (2011) terms as “unbundling”, the gradual removal of the academic all-rounder who is both teacher and researcher and student advisor into what he refers to as “para-academics”, those with responsibility for a limited function. “Others with academic identities have seen their research role wither as they are driven into specialist functions as ‘teachers’ or

‘managers’ ” (p.62). The research cites Whitchurch (2008) whom suggests that there is a blurring of lines of identities within the sector leading to role ambiguity, something that Baillien (2009) warns is an antecedent to workplace bullying and could reasonably be expected to lead to conflict.

Universities are also shifting academics to pursue two or three career paths, either teacher, researcher or manager (Macfarlane, 2007) a practice which could impede individual development and certainly prescriptively limit the wider autonomy afforded to the academic all-rounder. This polarisation could segregate the academic community and lead to tensions within the workplace, limiting career development and perhaps causing friction between teaching and research staff.

However, it could be argued that the prevailing notion of collegiality within the sector might constrain the development and escalation of workplace conflict. West (2006) describes the underpinning tensions that exist within university workplaces, as academics often describe themselves in relation to their subject discipline, i.e. as an economist or historian, rather than view themselves as an “employee” of the university. Winter (2009) extends this notion in relation to academic identity. He explains the notion of “identity schisms” that exist between individual values and the perception that all academics should adhere to and align to corporate values and goals. There is therefore an apparent tension between loyalty, value and priority given to the profession and loyalty to the university. The autonomy afforded to academic staff, and their professional sovereignty is likely to add to this mix. My previous experience as a manager within professional services springs to mind here. There was a disregard from academic staff for key university deadlines and perhaps some apathy towards quality processes and measurement activities. It would be wrong to generalise entirely but to a large degree these activities, though often key to achieving university

objectives, appeared to be viewed with a degree of frustration and classed as time away from the “day job” of teaching and research.

The changing nature of the sector, coupled with intensified application of managerial ideologies has been compounded by a prevalence of workload intensification within the sector. The average working week for academic staff is reported to be somewhere between 49 and 55 hours per week (McInnis 2000; Cataldi, et al., 2005; Forgasz and Leder 2006;). This has been explained as the effect of increased competition due to greater levels of audit and accountability (Vardi, 2009). The latter could be conceived of as increased levels of surveillance and control within the workplace. Anderson (2002) reports the increased administrative burden within the academic labour process, as academic staff are required to satisfy quality assurance processes; additionally the research suggests that job satisfaction is diminished. Boyd and Wylie (1994) and latterly Shaw (2014) report that increased workload has increased stress and affected levels of wellbeing and mental health. Vardi, (2009) provides a useful synthesis of approaches that Universities have taken to balance the academic workload by using workload allocation models. However, these models require a large degree of management information and managerial expertise in order to be delivered effectively. Yet there appears to be a lack of managerial expertise within the academic community (Lewis, 1999; Rees and Porter, 2004; Bennett, 2014,) and a lack of information with which to manage performance effectively (Broadbent 2006).

More compelling evidence of the potential for increased conflict comes from the Times Higher Education’s University Workplace Survey 2016. Grove (2016) highlighted issues of work intensification within the academic community, with one Russell Group lecturer reporting:

“I am constantly being asked to do more with less, which translates into longer and longer working hours. As a result, the level of compensation is completely incommensurate with the working hours reasonably needed in order to do everything that is demanded” (Grove 2016, para. 13).

Additional comments suggest that the academic workload is “unmanageable” and that the “unspeakably long hours” are not acknowledged by managers. The survey reports staff are pushed to the limit and one respondent suggested that they could make themselves “seriously ill with stress” if they maintained their current working practice. Sally Hunt, general secretary for UCU is quoted as warning:

“Survey after survey identifies increasing workloads and poor management as real problems for our universities, yet nothing is done to address the issues. Increasing workloads, higher rates of casualisation and diminishing support are not the way to deliver the world-class system that leaders and politicians say they want (Grove, 2016, para. 38).

Organisationally, conflict is generally viewed as a transactional process (Saundry, *et al.*, 2014) which inevitably leads to the use of formal processes. However, West (2006) suggests that, as conflict in the HE sector is inevitable and has the potential to become more frequent, that there is a need for staff to avoid being ‘disputatious’ and look to resolve disagreements in a more civilised manner. Whilst there is limited evidence of conflict being commonplace in UK institutions, measures of discipline and grievance only account for more acute examples of workplace conflict and therefore fail to illuminate the more opaque conflict that resides under the surface of organisations. Interestingly, HE institutions have been at the forefront of the development of internal mediation services and more innovative conflict management practices (Bennett,

2014). This may reflect the complexity of conflict within a rapidly changing HE environment and the prevalence of bullying and harassment, however the use of less adversarial resolution processes could also be consistent with notions of collegiality.

Bennett, (2014) provides an insightful account of mediation practices in the sector, and adds to the limited research into conflict within HE. His research in 16 of the 22 universities in the North of England found that implementation of mediation practices coincided with more robust performance management principles for academic staff. Reported causes of disputes were, poor management, communication problems and the breakdown of relationships. "Poor management" is perhaps a loose definition of a cause, but aforementioned issues of selection, experience, competence and training surely contribute to this. Bennett's findings also supported existing literature in relation to reluctant academic managers (Winter, 2009), and found that academics were often promoted to reward academic excellence, rather than on the basis of their ability to manage people (Rees and Porter, 2004):

"...interviewees talked about "the reluctant academic manager", for instance, where promotion was perceived by respondents as a means of rewarding academic excellence but often with little thought for the person's ability to manage people. This led, subsequently, to disputes over management style, strategy and poor communication. Furthermore, the reluctance of many academics to deal with conflict within their team or between individuals was also cited as a cause of disputes developing."

(Bennett, 2014, p.774)

Nonetheless, Bennett (2014) describes the growing practitioner interest in academic performance management issues, and the scope for conflict to arise from such

performance discussions. Whilst his research presented minimal evidence of such practices leading to disputes: “the feeling amongst HR respondents in particular was that given the changing nature of the sector, this could become a growing area of disputes and warrants further research” (p.771). Clearly there is potential for academic managers to not only become more adept at managing performance, but also addressing issues of conflict. The evidence presented so far suggests that they face a myriad of challenges.

Rees and Porter, (2004) contend that academics are appointed to managerial positions as a consequence of skills other than their people management capability, whilst Teague and Roche (2012) explain that managers lack organisational support and appropriate training despite them being considered as pivotal actors for the resolution of interpersonal conflict. When the contested and ambiguous nature of the role of an academic is added to this mix, the ability for academic managers to effectively manage their staff is called into question. West (2006, p.5) cites the Davies report (1994) as providing evidence of the deference to formal procedures when academic disputes arise:

“the large number of complaints and the readiness of those involved in what were primarily academic or academic-related disputes to involve complaints procedures instead of sorting out the problems in a civilised manner demonstrates a disputatious attitude which may be unavoidable but should not in my opinion be encouraged.”

Whilst this report is now over 20 years old, the issues referred to are still seen as prevalent in contemporary workplaces. It could be argued that academic managers, often not recruited to such positions on the basis of managerial capability and more



comfortable with written rather than verbal communication, are likely to seek sanctuary of procedural guidance when faced with conflict.

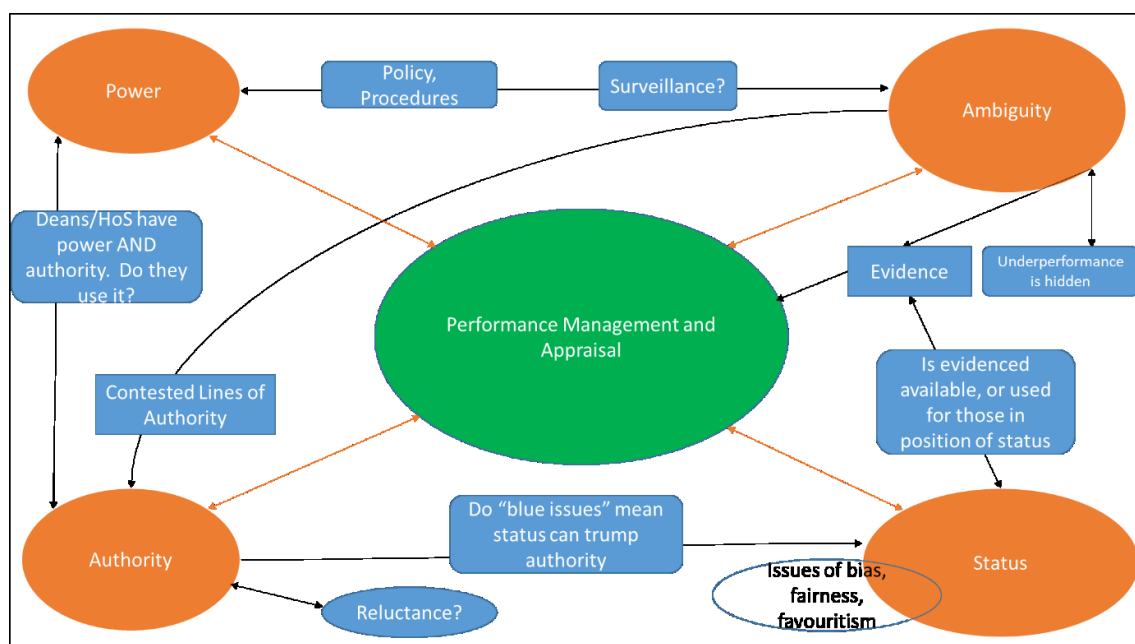
It is hoped that this research thesis can add to the understanding of the under researched area of academic conflict. Anecdotal evidence suggest that conflict in HE might manifest itself more in disengagement (Purcell, 2014) rather than more overt, identifiable conflict, due in part to prevailing cultures of collegiality and autonomy and the aforementioned “distance” that the roles provide between those individuals involved.

### **3.9 Conceptual Framework**

The literature review has provided sufficient information to begin to form the conceptual framework which will guide this study. Robson (2002) suggests that a conceptual framework is often presented in diagrammatical form; to that end figure 3 overleaf presents my initial attempts at developing the framework. Green (2014) explains that the conceptual framework acts as a guiding principle for the research, and Silverman (2007) argues that this should be an iterative, cyclical process rather than a linear one. To that end, the production of the framework has provided me with a useful lens with which to approach the study but should not be viewed as an absolute representation of this complex issue. The following paragraphs provide some descriptive commentary to support understanding of the conceptual framework.

There appear to be a number of factors which interplay and have the potential to affect perceptions of the success and value of performance management and performance appraisal systems within academic settings. The framework suggests that themes of power, authority and status are of pivotal importance to performance management and appraisal within academia. These themes are made all the more important, given

the fourth and final theme of ambiguity. It is this ambiguity that can afford those with status the opportunity to defend performance issues, and undermine attempts to address such concerns. The relationship between ambiguity and status is therefore viewed as important as this can shape resistance to performance management, particularly when a lack of objective data is available. The consistency within which performance data is considered is also problematic, and the framework depicts the extent to which evidence is meaningfully used and discussed, particularly with those who enjoy a high level of organisational status. There is potential for performance data and associated discussions around performance to be held with those who don't enjoy high levels of organisational status, or with more junior staff. Attempts to do so might be less frequent if performance issues were identified in staff who do hold a high level of status. The ambiguity within the academic labour process, and with performance outcomes provides an opportunity for status to trump attempts at managing performance. Therefore the framework highlights the potential inconsistency in application of performance constructs.



**Figure 3 – The Conceptual Framework of Performance Management in HE**

Directly related to this, is the extent to which authority is accepted as legitimate by actors involved within performance management. Devolved responsibility to staff who might hold nuanced positions as “managers” means that the interplay between status and authority is important. A lack of tangible evidence, and a lack of meaningful managerial authority is likely to render performance discussions as a tick box exercise, or make it more likely that managers will seek to avoid addressing difficult performance issues. Flatter academic structures mean that those who are responsible for appraisal might not hold any greater authority over those individuals that they are appraising. Weberian conceptions of authority seem difficult to apply to academic settings. There appears to be the potential for professors or associate professors to be appraised (and have their performance managed) by those with a lesser academic status. Clearly, this imbalance, *could* present issues for the effectiveness of performance discussions.

The framework depicts the extent to which power might be deployed through the organisation in terms of agenda setting, through policy and procedure, and the degree to which the labour process and the “subjects” (to use Foucaults terminology) can be illuminated. The literature suggests that the academic labour process is opaque and prone to measurement issues, which is the why the interplay between power and ambiguity is of interest. So too are issues of authority and power, taking an agency perspective, it is argued by Alvesson and Spicer (2016) that Deans (and senior management) hold power and authority within organisations. The extent to which they are willing to discharge their authority will have implications for the performance management processes, particularly given the aforementioned nuanced lines of authority that line managers might hold in the flatter, matrix structures utilised in academia. In this environment, the support of senior management appears to be vital for the exercise of power and effective management of performance, and particularly

issues of underperformance. It is senior management that hold legitimate authority (and arguably status), which is less likely to be challenged. Consequently, the extent to which they are prepared to discharge that authority, in support of line managers, appears to be a key facet of performance management in HE

In the framework, I have termed “blue issues” as areas that affect the interplay between the four pillars of power, authority, status and ambiguity. These are issues which I suspect will contribute to the complexity of performance management within the HE sector. Consequently, the research will aim to identify the relationships between these areas, and consider the potential consequences that these have for meaningful discussion, for potential conflict, for perceptions of fairness, and for issues to be ignored.

This section has described initial attempts to conceptualise performance management in higher education. The following chapter provides a detailed account of the methodology which will inform this research study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.0 Introduction**

This thesis provides accounts from academic staff, senior management and HR and TU representatives. It has gathered in depth accounts of individual perceptions of issues relating to performance management and the impact of such systems on cases of conflict and bullying. The literature review has provided evidence of the challenges of effectively managing performance, and provided an insight into the particular difficulties this presents within an HE setting. In addition, issues relating to conflict (and the nuances of conflict) have been discussed, both generally and with a view to the scope for such issues within the HE sector. The design of this research is intended to explore the challenges and complexity of performance management systems in higher education, using a case study analysis of three HE institutions in the south of England. This approach is taken with a view to answering the following questions:

1. How is the impact of performance management processes shaped by managerial attitudes and behaviour?
2. How are these issues affected by issues of power, control and the academic environment?
3. How does performance management impact upon matters of conflict?
4. To what extent (and how) can performance management strategies be tailored to reflect notions of collegiality and autonomy that have traditionally underpinned the academic environment?

The study will discuss potentially sensitive issues relating to managerial behaviour, competence, academic performance, and issues of conflict that potentially result from

these discussions through performance management systems. An appropriate research methodology is therefore of paramount importance to ensure that the essence of such issues is understood within the three case study institutions.

This chapter will present and discuss the research philosophy and methodology used within the research thesis. The nature of philosophical thinking is introduced, and the historical underpinnings are discussed. The paradigm of inquiry is then introduced, and an explanation of my own ontological and epistemological positions are presented. The relationship these positions have with the research topic is then considered and described. Having discussed these theoretical underpinnings, the research methodology, method and approaches to data collection will be set out in detail. Furthermore, the trustworthiness and limitations of the study will be examined as well as the ethical considerations involved within this sensitive research area. In recognition of my position as an employee of the case study institution (at the time of the research), a section on insider research and reflexivity is included.

#### **4.1 The Nature of Philosophy**

According to Kant, the 'Enlightenment' of the mid-17th century was the period in which philosophical thinking developed (Howell, 2013). Since this time, there has been a continued and often paradoxical evolution of the subject which has spawned a variety of opinion on the nature of philosophy, knowledge and reality (see Kant, Hegel and Marx, cited in Howell, 2013). Philosophy is defined as 'the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence...' (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). Jackson, (2013) asserts that in order to build a substantive conceptual framework, an understanding of the researcher's philosophical position is vital. Extending this view, she proposes that "research rigour can be strengthened by the researcher making

transparent the philosophy that underpins the justification of their research methodology” (Jackson, 2013, p.50).

Edmond Husserl (1859–1938), one of the founding fathers of the phenomenological discourse, proposed that consciousness required experience from personal perspectives and the consideration of what individuals heard, saw or felt. In addition, Husserl contends that attribution is given to events as individuals give meaning to their experience (Howell, 2013). The theory that a person’s view and perception of reality is subjective and individual is one that resonates with me, and matches my own values and beliefs. When contrasted with more empiricist and positivist views of the world, those rooted in natural sciences, my own position as a social scientist is strengthened. A positivist position suggests that reality can be totally understood, is out there and can be discovered (Howell, 2013). This is counter to my own beliefs. I recognise the subjective and multiple accounts of reality, and accept that these are individual constructions rather than facts or truths. Gray (2014) explains that, whilst many of the approaches espoused from positivist doctrines are still used, (such as empirical inquiry and experimental designs) the social sciences have “challenged positivism’s avowed certainties about the nature and results of scientific inquiry” (p.23). The way in which I understand reality is beneficial for the research, as I anticipated that I would be faced with multiple versions of reality through dialogue with participants, and I accepted that a number of the issues which were discussed during interviews were of a highly subjective nature.

The way in which reality is understood is identified as an ontological position (Jackson, 2013). A constructivist ontology proposes that reality is locally constructed and based on experience. Reality is viewed as individual, yet the perception is shared by many and is changeable (Howell, 2013). This understanding is particularly useful in the

context of this research and therefore the ontological position seems entirely appropriate for this study.

This area of the literature has begun to shape the paradigm of inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.19) describe the paradigm of inquiry as “a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied.” The following section provides specific details regarding the selected paradigm and provides an analysis and rationale for the decision in the context of the research question.

## **4.2 Research Philosophy**

The research is underpinned by a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology proposes that there is a relationship between mind and world and subject and object (Howell, 2013). Phenomenological research accepts that views are subjective and therefore require interpretation, in order to make the distinction between subject and object (Howell, 2013). The perspective focusses on not just *what* appears but on *how* it appears (Lewis and Staehler, 2010). These philosophical perspectives align with my own values and also appear to be appropriate in the context of the research; which aims to understand individual perceptions surrounding issues of performance management and the potential for forms of workplace conflict to emerge as a consequence of scrutiny of individual performance. Furthermore, it was important to understand not just that the phenomena exists, but how it manifests itself and the impact that this had on those exposed to such issues. My own interpretation around the stories described by the actors involved will also be crucial to doing justice to their own narratives and experiences.

Husserl (1970) explains that phenomenological research aims to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions. In



order to aid understanding multiple methods are often used within a phenomenological paradigm to achieve a variety of perceptions (Lewis and Staehler, 2010). In the context of this research, a case study approach was taken, but the study was further illuminated through my own observation and personal reflections. Returning to Husserl's assertion, some preconception was inevitable, as I am a former substantive member of staff within one of the case study institutions and a current staff member in another. This will be addressed more fully in the sections to follow.

Collis and Hussey (2003) explain that the phenomenological discourse is concerned with understanding human behaviour from the participant's own perspective, this has implications for the chosen methodology and method, and it was important that I accurately captured the narrative that describes these individual perceptions. Husserl (1859-1938), explains that meaning and conscious experience was central to the notion of phenomenology (Howell, 2013). He argued that by establishing meaning, individuals are presented with a structured world, which includes the recognition that the individual resides within that structured world (Husserl, 1969 cited in Howell, 2013). There is broad agreement that an understanding and distinction between the internal and external world and levels of subjectivity and objectivity are provided through the notion of phenomenology (Howell, 2013). Priest (2004, p.4) contends that phenomenology is simply "understood to be the study of phenomena or 'things'". Whilst this is an easily accessible, catchall definition, phenomenological approaches are in reality often paradoxical and inexact.

Indeed, Priest (2004) explains that there are conflicting traditions and perspectives that have evolved from theories such as Husserl's 'Transcendental phenomenology' and Heidegger's 'interpretive phenomenology'. Therefore, whilst phenomenology



context of the research, but to attempt to describe *why* they interpreted the phenomena in the way that they did. A phenomenological perspective focusses on not just *what* appears but on *how* it appears (Lewis and Staehler, 2010). Approaching the research process from a phenomenological position therefore seemed appropriate when investigating the phenomena of sensitive workplace issues such as individual performance and the extent to which this impacted on issues of conflict. Views of such phenomenon were inevitably subjective and wide ranging as individuals give attribution to their own lived experience (Howell, 2013).

#### **4.3 Paradigm of Inquiry**

There are a number of varying definitions on research paradigms. Terms appear to be used interchangeably, and there appears to be a lack of unified agreement between what constitutes ontological and epistemological positions. Guba (1990) defines the research paradigm of inquiry as an interpretative framework, which is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world, these assumptions constitute and inform the ontological and epistemological perspective of the researcher and decisions about how the research will be conducted. Hammond and Wellington, (2012) further explain that ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, existence, or reality. Ontological questions are philosophical in nature; common ontological questions are concerned with the nature of social reality (Crotty, 1998). This is entirely appropriate given the area of research as discussions around performance, and subsequent potential issues of conflict are unequivocally social processes. Guba (1990) also explains that an individual's position in relation to the paradigm of inquiry is exactly that - individual, it cannot be proven or disproven empirically.

#### **4.4 Ontology**

Ontological questions are concerned with the form and nature of reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This research was guided by a constructivist ontology. I believe that meaning is constructed through social and cultural practice, and through dialogue (Robson, 2002). Crotty (1998) describes the constructivist approach as meaning being made in the conscious mind of man. This provides an understanding of the research phenomena both at the social and cultural level and an understanding of the research participants' own interpretation of their experiences. A constructivist ontology rejects the notion that knowledge, truth and reality exists in an external world, and instead asserts that it is created by subjects' interaction with the world (Gray, 2014). Constructivism asserts that natural reality and social reality are entirely different and require different methodologies and methods.

The natural sciences (which adopts a far more positivist perspective) aims to identify consistency in data to deduce laws and norms, whereas the social sciences deal with actions of individuals (ideographic) (Gray, 2014). Indeed, Crotty (1998) suggests a positivist stance will deliver results as objective facts and established truths. Due to the subjective nature of the research phenomena, this was not a realistic proposition, and not one that the research sought to provide. Acknowledging the differentiation in approach has implications for the chosen research methodology and method which will be discussed later. Silverman (2007) explains that there are areas of social research which statistics cannot measure, and that a deeper understanding of social phenomena can be obtained through qualitative investigation. This is very much in keeping with my own beliefs and the context of this research was inevitably prone to issues of context and subjectivity and consequently required in-depth investigation. Returning to the issue of definitions within the methodological discourse, Creswell,

(2013) explains that social constructivism is often labelled as interpretivism (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2001 and Mertens, 2010).

Cresswell (2013) provides a detailed insight into the use of a social constructivist ontology which resonates with me and the appropriateness of this ontology to the research is clear. He explains that meanings of participant experience are varied and multiple and that the researcher is required to look for the complexity of these views, and rely as much as possible on the participant's view of the situation. The subjective meanings are developed through interaction and engagement with others (hence the terms social) and through historical and cultural norms that revolve around individual lives. Further, and of particular relevance to me due to my position as somebody working in, and with experience of the sector, Cresswell (2013) explains that researchers are required to recognise their own background, and personal experiences which shape the way they interpret the perceptions of the actors involved within the research. To make sense and meaning of others view of the world requires interpretation, hence the reference to interpretivism within the social constructivist approach. The relationship between researcher and researched will be discussed in more detail within the epistemology discussion, but in the context of my existing position in the sector, it is important to note that meaning and reality within social constructivism is often co-constructed between researcher and participants. For example, Gubrium and Holstein (2002) highlight the role of active interviewing as a "reality-constructing, meaning making occasion" (p4).

#### **4.5 Epistemology**

Ontology and epistemology are linked as the nature of reality or being (ontology) is subject to beliefs around the creation, and understanding of knowledge. Epistemology identifies relationships 'between the knower or would be knower and what can be

known' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.108). Therefore, an acknowledgement regarding the position of the researcher and the research topic is required. In this case, I interacted with the research and consequently was intrinsically involved in the research process (Bryman and Bell, 2011). This was appropriate for the research question, as I work within the field of academia. This issue will be addressed in detail within the sections on insider research and reflexivity. The approach taken within this research was in direct contrast with a positive paradigm which requires the researcher to be objective and independent from the research, (Bryman and Bell, 2011) something which would have been challenging to achieve during this research process. A social constructivist epistemology is subjective and created using social inquiry to establish meanings and experiences (Howell, 2014). This epistemological position is in line with a phenomenological approach and informs and complements the chosen research method of semi-structured interviews, as data gathered in this way relies on evidence gathered from open-ended questions, which individuals ascribe meaning to (Cresswell, 2013) furthermore, the subjective meanings can be captured to recognise the complex experience of the participants involved (Cresswell, 2013).

## **4.6 Methodology**

Research methodology is influenced by the researcher's philosophical belief and underpinned by their ontological and epistemological position (Gray, 2014). The research paradigm therefore provides a guiding framework from the conceptual to the practical elements of research (Howell, 2013). A description of the primary research (case study) methodology is provided below.

### **4.6.1 Case Study Methodology**

A case study methodology was used within the research. Lester (1999) explains that phenomenological approaches can be applied to single case research and contends

that “Phenomenological research can be robust in indicating the presence of factors and their effects in individual cases, but must be tentative in suggesting their extent in relation to the population from which the participants or cases were drawn” (p1). Whilst the use of a comparison between three institutions did not materially extend the suggestion of application to a wider population, it did identify more clearly, *potential* aspects of synergy between institutions, in a way a single case study might not.

Stake (1994, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2001) makes reference to the notion of the ‘intrinsic case study’ which makes no attempt to generalise beyond the single case study or to even build theories. The HE sector is discreet from other sectors, and the literature review has suggested that prevailing issues of structure, autonomy and collegiality make institutions distinct from traditional organisations in the private and public sector. Within the sector it is accepted that there will be a degree of variation in terms of the academic environment, and working practices, and therefore approaches to performance management will be contextual. Consequently, the research aimed to develop an understanding and picture of issues within the case study institutions only, although clearly having an opportunity for comparison did lend itself to an evaluation of similarities and differences.

Yin (2014) describes a case study as an extensive examination of a single phenomenon within its real life-context. Whilst the extent to which the examination was of one single phenomenon is open to question, the investigation was extensive, and took account of participants’ lived experience within their institution. There are numerous critiques of the case study approach, for example Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest that case study research can represent an oversimplification of situations, and lead the researcher to make wider exaggerated claims beyond the boundaries of the case study. In contrast, Silverman (2011) explains that claims of generalisability are

not the goal of qualitative researchers and this was certainly true of this research. There are also several advantages which are discussed below. However, I did not ignore these criticisms and they are accepted and addressed in the limitations section of the chapter. Flyvbjerg, (2006) explains that phenomenological positions and case study methodologies align and challenge numerous preconceptions around the use of the case study methodology. These include:

- 1) That general theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge. However Flyvberg (p.7) explains that “Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is therefore more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals”.
- 2) Cases as ‘Black Swans’ - The view that one cannot generalize on the basis of a single case is a frequent criticism of the case study method, often projected from natural scientists. However, Flyvberg explains that case studies are ideal for falsification (part of critical reflexivity) and cites the now famous example from Karl Popper (see Howell, 2012). Popper suggested that falsification can dispel notions of truth such as statements like “All swans are white” – the suggestion being that the sight of one single black swan being sufficient to dispel the proposition. Flyvberg asserts that “The case study is well suited for identifying ‘black swans’ because of its in-depth approach: what appears to be ‘white’ often turns out on closer examination to be ‘black’” (p.11).
- 3) Flyvberg challenges the suggestion that the case study method is most appropriate for generating hypotheses, as part of the initial steps in the research process. Furthermore, the idea that hypothesis-testing and theory-building is



best carried out by other methods later in the process is challenged. This, according to Flyvberg is because of a misunderstanding which "...derives from the previous misunderstanding that one cannot generalize on the basis of individual cases. And since this misunderstanding has been revised as above, we can now correct the third misunderstanding as follows: The case study is useful for *both* generating and testing of hypotheses but is not limited to these research activities alone (p.13)".

- 4) That case studies lead towards bias for verification and allow more room for the researcher's subjective and arbitrary judgements than other methods. However, Flyvberg (2006) explains that numerous researchers whom have conducted intensive, in depth case studies have found that their assumptions and preconceptions were in fact wrong and the case study has compelled them to revise their hypothesis. Therefore, whilst it is useful to have an awareness of the potential for the researcher's bias and subjectivity to influence the research, it appears that the rigour of the case study approach could actually challenge, rather than facilitate this. Yin (1994) address the notion of bias in the case study context and explains that they are particularly prone to such problems due to the fact that researchers must have an understanding of the issues and use discretion. He suggests that research assistants are less likely to demonstrate such bias, but further suggests that critical colleagues review initial findings during the data collection and offer alternative explanations for the data as a means of challenging and reducing bias.
- 5) Due to the substantial amount of narrative captured within a case study, critics suggest that it is impossible to summarise case studies into neat scientific formulae (see Benhabib 1990, Rouse 1990, Roth 1989, White 1990, Mitchell

and Charmaz 1996 in Flyvberg, 2006). Flyvberg argues that this is not a problem for the case study researcher as firstly, this could suggest that the study has uncovered rich data and secondly summarisation and generalisation is not always desirable. Peattie (2001, p.260) argues against summarising dense case studies: "It is simply that the very value of the case study, the contextual and interpenetrating nature of forces, is lost when one tries to sum up in large and mutually exclusive concepts". Further, Flyvberg (p.24) contends that "Case researchers (...) tend to be sceptical about erasing phenomenological detail in favour of conceptual closure". Whilst I was mindful of this observation, and certainly did not view generalisation as a goal, I recognised that some themes might have been consistent across the three case studies during the course of the primary research. Care was taken however, to ensure precision when compiling such themes to prevent the loss of compelling areas of the findings.

Flyvberg's work helped to challenge the preconceptions around case study research and also provided me with numerous points of reference. Returning to the advantages of the approach, it is suggested that detailed insight can be obtained through developing an understanding of the social phenomenon at play by utilising a case study approach (Silverman, 2011). This was particularly important in the context of the research, and a rich narrative (Silverman, 2011) was developed through accounts of the actors within the institutions under investigation. In order to truly understand the behaviour, attitudes and responses of actors involved in complex, emotive and social issues relating to performance, a case study approach was viewed as entirely appropriate, a view substantiated by Flyvberg (2006), who used a similar approach when trying to examine the complex issue of power and rationality in urban

environments. When returning to Husserl's (1970) suggestion that phenomenological research seeks to understand rather than explain human behaviour, the choice of case study methodology was clearly consistent with the research philosophy, but also provided practical solutions to answer the research questions. Knox (2004) warns researchers about the misalignment of philosophy and methodology, and explains that researchers should not feel tied to hierarchical decisions around philosophy, methodology and method. Furthermore, he explains that the suitability in answering the research question is of high importance. In the case of this research, there was a natural synergy between philosophy, ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Yin (1994) presents four applications for a case study model:

1. To explain complex causal links in real-life interventions
2. To describe the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred
3. To describe the intervention itself
4. To explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes.

I did not anticipate or intend to be able to explain the complex causal links, due to my belief that participants' accounts of reality will be subjective and multiple (Cresswell 2013 and Howell 2012) and therefore too varied to provide definitive explanations. However, I hoped that rich descriptions would be provided in order to provide a detailed description. Guba and Lincoln (1981) explain that the application of the case study provides rich accounts within complex social situations, a view with significant support (e.g. Simons, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). Guba and Lincoln explain that such insights can arguably be termed as tentative hypotheses that can help inform future research and as such advance the knowledge base. Advancing

the knowledge base through further research, is a recommendation of the research thesis. The extent to which issues are prevalent within the wider sector can then be considered. As I worked as an associate lecturer at Westville, it is important to consider topics of insider research and furthermore the use of reflexivity within the research. These topics are addressed in the sections which follow.

#### **4.6.3 Insider Research and Reflexivity**

This section will describe the topics of insider research and reflexivity, and provide clarity around how an understanding of these topics aided the research process.

##### **4.6.3.1 Insider Research**

Insider research is defined as research conducted by people who are already members of the organization or community they are seeking to investigate as a result of education, employment, social networks or political engagements (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005, in Humphrey, 2012). The notion of insider research in an educational context is described by Mercer (2007). She explains that exact distinctions between outsider research and insider research should be treated with caution and that in fact a continuum exists between insider and outsider research; a view supported by Breen, (2007) and Crossley, *et al.*, (2016). This is an assertion which resonates with me. At the time of the research, I was not a permanent member of academic staff, but a student researcher, employed on a casual contract basis at one of the institutions within this research. However, prior to this I was employed permanently within a professional services setting, rather than an academic department. This afforded me an understanding of academic culture, politics and policy, but I was arguably more removed, less “inside” than substantively employed academic colleagues.

As someone who was involved in HE for 8 years, I made a number of connections, if not friendships, with numerous staff within the faculty. They have told me of their frustrations with elements of the role and I therefore developed a level of understanding and empathy. Therefore, the idea of a position within the continuum referred to by Mercer, is one which seemed to fit my situation in the context of this research. Although I was unclear on my precise position within this continuum and would argue that I felt like more of an “insider” amongst certain groups than others. Griffith (1998) explains that the insider is:

“Someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her [sic] a lived familiarity with the group being researched” while the outsider is a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group” (p. 361).

By this definition, I would indeed apply the label of an inside researcher to myself, however the notion of the continuum is useful when conceptualising the extent of “insider-ness”. When I consider my biography I do not believe my gender provides me with any sense of insider-ness, although I perceive my age, or rather my appearance (I look younger than my years) actually presents something of a distance between myself and my peers. I am reluctant to attend to the issue of class, and deliberately do not consult literature or theory on this. I perhaps view myself as more working-class, or at least from a more working class background than many of my colleagues, many of whom I would consider as middle class. Perhaps the truth is that a continuum exists here too, as when I compare myself (and my partner) to friends, or friends of friends, I feel I am less “working class” and more “middle-class” than many of them.

Rather than wrestle with the extent to which I am an insider, I was keen to understand the way in which such a position effects the research. Mercer (2007) conducts a useful discussion on the pros and cons of insider research. In relation to access she explains that the inside researcher benefits from easier access to participants, faces fewer challenges of intrusiveness and has the benefit of existing familiarity in order to build rapport. This combined with greater credibility might engender a greater level of rapport and subsequently lead to thicker data. There are a number of participants within my own faculty that I was able to contact, and with whom it was easy to establish credibility and rapport. However, in order to gain a rounded picture and make fair representation of my own institution, the opinion of participants across the University was sought. Therefore there were numerous respondents that I didn't know and didn't have any pre-existing relationships with. Furthermore, I had little or no connection with interviewees from the other two case study institutions. Brekhus (1998) warns that insiders might be more likely to take things for granted and assume that their own perspective is more widely shared. Hockey (1993) also suggests that insiders might fail to ask the obvious question, whilst Preedy and Riches (1998) suggest that sensitive topics might not be discussed. When considering these positions, the notion of the continuum is useful. There is no doubt that the position I enjoyed, and my biography (i.e. a former substantive member of professional services staff) afforded a degree of accessibility that otherwise would not have been possible. The distance between myself and some respondents provided a level of rapport that allowed for a degree of openness and candour (Mercer, 2007). However, at the time of the research I had not worked permanently in an academic position and there were many areas (and individuals) that I approached objectively, as I had not necessarily shared the same experience as those participants. For those participants interviewed outside of

my own faculty and institution, trust was inevitably more difficult to build, but I am confident that this did not impact upon my ability to build sufficient connection for an open and engaging discussion.

Preedy and Riches (1998) explain that distortion can arise within insider research for two reasons, firstly due to respondents “tempering the truth in the knowledge that fruitful professional relationships ... [have] ... to continue after the research had been completed” (p221). There was some scope for this to happen given the potentially emotive subject of the research, and my position as a colleague for some within my own institution. This was of course subjective depending upon the relationship with respondents, although upon reviewing the interview transcripts and recordings, participants were generally candid. Secondly, it is argued that preconceptions from participants might colour their accounts, if they are aware of the interviewer’s stance or position due to their prior knowledge of them as insiders. I do not consider this second point to be an issue due to the fact that I have never publicly stated opinions in relation to the subject matter, and because I do not have prior knowledge of participant’s views on the topic. Furthermore, a sufficient number of respondents were interviewed where no previous relationship existed.

The gathering of rich data is also shaped by the extent to which the researcher is adept at interviewing, which will impact upon the narratives provided by the participants (Silverman, 2000), as will the extent to which participants are assured that issues of ethics and anonymity have been considered and are robust (Unluer, 2012). The issues mentioned above, whilst clearly important to consider, were not as significant as perhaps they might have been for those insider researchers that are closer to the participants, i.e. those using a more ethnographic, or action research approach with direct colleagues (Howell, 2013).

Humphrey (2012) explains that solo insider studies are the most risk-laden and suggests support and safeguards for the researcher including a consultant-type figure whom can provide debriefing as required. I viewed the supervisory team as being able to adopt such a position, but recognised the need to maintain confidentiality during any such (limited) de-briefs that occurred during the research project.

#### **4.6.3.2 Reflexivity**

The subject of reflexivity within the research methods discourse is often considered within the healthcare and educational settings and disciplines including sociology and psychology (Lambert, *et al.*, 2010). Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, (1997) explain that reflexivity is a sociological concept and should therefore be distinguished from self-reflection. The notion of reflexivity is concerned with reducing researcher bias, that may be inherent, and yet unintentional due to their exposure to the environment in which they are researching. There is wide agreement of the importance of reflexivity within qualitative studies, and that this is particularly true of research within educational settings (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997; Macbeth, 2001 and Greenbank, 2003). Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford explain that reflexivity is a concept which should be understood at three levels, in terms of learning in general, in relation to research design and finally with respect to the production of educational knowledge.

In relation to learning the authors explain that:

“When we learn about people and about social events, the process is more complex. Our understanding of any kind of event is conditioned by our prior knowledge, but in this case the object of our interest behaves according to their own understanding of what it is they are doing. We cannot really understand why they act in a particular way unless we first discover what their intentions are.”



(Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997, p238)

In this research, reflexivity was also practiced as a means of not only proactively addressing issues of bias, but also to validate the research process (Kingdon, 2005 and Cutcliffe and McKenna, 2002). By recognising that my own values, perceptions and behaviours, and those of respondents can impact on both data collection and analysis, there was a clear need for a continuous reflective process (Parahoo, 2006 and Watt, 2007). Although Parahoo does not include the notion of preconceptions, this is something that I also recognised as a potential consideration. The topic of preconception is addressed by Tufford and Newman, (2012) when discussing the use of bracketing in qualitative research. Bracketing is used to mitigate issues of unacknowledged preconceptions and aims to protect the researcher from the cumulative effect of dealing with challenging material. Further, Starks and Trinidad, (2007, p1376) note that the researcher:

“must be honest and vigilant about her own perspective, pre-existing thoughts and beliefs, and developing hypotheses ... engage in the self-reflective process of “bracketing”, whereby they recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their prior knowledge and assumptions, with the analytic goal of attending to the participants accounts with an open mind”

Whilst bracketing and reflexivity are therefore explained as separate disciplines and processes, the use of bracketing can be complementary to the goal of developing reflexivity with the research. Cresswell, (1996, p. 133) warns that “interviewers who share experiences with informants minimize the “bracketing” that is essential to construct the meaning of participants in phenomenology and reduces information shared by informants in case studies and ethnography”. However, both Oakley (1981)

and Logan (1984) argue that interviewers contend that sharing experiences and attitudes helps to develop trust, and that the researcher should therefore not withhold their own views. I tend to think that those views of Oakley and Logan fit with my opinion on the subject and whilst clearly a balance needs to be struck (which will be considered in the data collection section) it was my belief and intention to share my own experiences with respondents and enter into discussion.

Returning to notions of reflexivity, I do not consider my preconceptions (Tufford and Newman, 2012) or values, perceptions and behaviours (Parahoo, 2006) to be unacknowledged, indeed it is entirely understandable that I, having worked in the institution for some time and therefore having been exposed to themes of environment, structure, policy and process, would have numerous beliefs and values on the topic. As a former manager I have had to manage the performance of others, and feel that I understand the politics involved in such instances, and have an awareness of some of the factors that impeded managers in tackling issues of performance. When reflecting on my own experience, this includes the “softening” of such action due to the wish to maintain positive relations with staff. Similarly, through the use of the institution’s PDR system I have experience of being “rated” by my manager and the impact that this rating had on me in terms of motivation, satisfaction and the feeling of being under-appreciated.

Yin (1994) explains that in order for the researcher to carry out effective case study research, they must have a good understanding of the issues within the case study setting. Therefore, they are predisposed to issues of bias. In acknowledging these issues and discussing them, it is hoped that the validity and rigour of the research can be strengthened, and in a practical sense, this insight ensured that I maintained a disciplined position throughout the data gathering process. The section on insider

research evidences my commitment to reflexivity within the research. Humphrey (2007) explains that researchers who fail to be sufficiently reflexive, particularly when conducting insider research might be oblivious to the risks involved in conducting such research.

Morrow (2006, cited in Lambert et al., 2010) contends that reflexivity can be used by researchers as a means by which to understand the phenomenon which is being studied and support the accurate portrayal of this through self-examination, as a means of understanding biases and assumptions which could impact upon the study. In the context of this research this assertion was viewed as particularly important and valuable. As a social constructivist position was taken, subjective and multiple accounts from respondents were anticipated (Cresswell, 2013). Therefore, a thorough exploration of the meaning of experiences described by participants was required.

Underpinning these ideals were issues around my own honesty and integrity. Shacklock and Smyth (1998, p.6) explain: "To not acknowledge the interests implicit in a critical agenda for the research, or to assume value-free positions of neutrality, is to assume an obscene and dishonest position". As I have been exposed to cultural and political forces (Tufford and Newman, 2012 and Drake, 2010;) within the primary case study institution as a former manager, and have had my own performance managed as an employee, inevitably I do not occupy a "value-free" or neutral position. Whilst, Howell, (2013) and Blaikie (2010) argue that no researcher enters the field without some pre-conceptions, I recognise that the aforementioned conditions might have led to more pronounced or unconscious pre-conceptions being present within the study.

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, (1997) assert that “it is impossible for researchers to avoid contaminating the data with their own understandings, intentions, perceptions and values”. I was therefore mindful of the temptation to look for examples or descriptions which supported my initial views but which may not have existed in reality, or to overstate examples of this. This returns us to Guba and Lincoln’s (1981) warning in relation to the case study researcher reaching exaggerated or erroneous conclusions. Further, on the topic of researcher honesty and integrity, Guba and Lincoln (1981, p378) explain that: “An unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated”. Such concerns will be addressed in the ethics section. To avoid contaminating the data I let the participants “speak for themselves” using their own discourse (Cresswell, 2013 and Silverman, 2011).

This chapter has provided a detailed examination and description of the methodological choices and considerations which informed this research study. The following chapter addresses some of the more practical considerations within the research, by describing the methods which were used.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS**

### **5.0 Introduction**

The previous sections have helped to explain the rationale for the chosen methodology. The methodological approach informs the chosen data collection method of semi-structured interviews. This chapter provides a description of the three case study institutions and uses the fictitious names that I gave each institution in order to provide some confidentiality. These institutional names are referenced frequently later in the thesis. The description of the institutions helps to place the discussion that follows into some context, and makes following my explanations and examples more straightforward. Following these descriptions, the approach to the selection of participants is described, followed by the rationale for the chosen method of interviews. The data collection process within the research is then explained, with the chapter closing with a discussion of ethical considerations within this research.

### **5.1 The Case Study Institutions**

What follows is a brief description of the three case study institutions. I believe that this will help to explain the context of the quotes and commentary which is provided in the findings and discussion chapters. These pen pictures help to explain the similarities and differences within the three institutions and set the scene for the views and opinions of the actors who work within them.

#### **5.1.1 Westville University**

Westville is the primary case study within this research and where I was employed for the majority of this research study. The institution employs nearly 3,000 staff and has a student population of over 20,000. The university is divided into five faculties each

with their own Dean and a link HR faculty business partner. Structures within each faculty appear to vary; some faculties are divided into schools and then into departments, whilst others are divided into schools and then subject groups. A matrix structure is used and perceptions around lines of authority were fairly mixed. Whilst Westville is a post 92 institution, it appears to identify and conduct itself as a sub-Russell Group university with a clear focus on research. This is apparent in recruitment and selection decision making and for academic promotion exercises. The PDR process is the same for both professional services and academic staff throughout the university, although practices seem to vary. The appraiser is required to provide a rating for each person they appraise along with a summary of the PDR discussion, a justification of the rating (which should be agreed where possible) and a set of objectives. This is then returned to HR.

### **5.1.2 Robbins University**

Robbins employs nearly 4,000 staff and has a student population of nearly 30,000. The university, also a post-92, has five faculties, and the business partner model is also used here. Structures within faculties appear more consistent than at Westville, and under the Dean and Head of School, there are a number of heads of department and associate heads of department. Whilst a matrix structure is in place at Robbins, there appears to be greater clarity in terms of responsibility and reporting lines. Whilst research is conducted at the university, the institution clearly identifies itself as a teaching university in the first instance, and has a strategy which supports this aim. The PDR process is the same for both professional services and academic staff throughout the university. No rating is required as a consequence of the PDR process.

### **5.1.3 Mortown University**

Mortown is also a post-92 university. It is a smaller operation than both Westville and Robbins, employing just 120 staff, with a student body of 2,500. The university has undergone a great deal of organisational change; historically it has been highly teaching and student focussed, though the pendulum appeared to swing to research under the former vice chancellor. Efforts have now been renewed towards teaching once again. These changes had some impact on the performance management process, accounts of which are captured in the findings section. The institution has two faculties allowing for a much more traditional organisational structure, and clearer reporting lines than the more complex structures in place at Robbins and Westville. This has implications for the appraisal as the appraiser is clearly the line manager, and appears to have a clearer control and appreciation for individual performance and workload. The PDR process is the same for both academic and professional service staff and no rating is required.

### **5.2 Sample Selection**

There are a range of sampling techniques available to the qualitative researcher. Rubin and Babbie, (2009) describe a sample as a group within a population that is studied to make inferences about the nature or behaviour of the entire population. Whilst the purpose of this research was not to provide generalizable findings which could be applied to a wider population, the sample from across the three institutions did serve to offer evidence that *could* inform further study, and was suggestive of patterns which *might* exist in the wider HE sector.

This section addresses sampling both from the perspective of case selection, and participant selection. Further information on participants within the study is provided within section 5.3.

Initially, this research was designed as a single case study. The primary case study within this institution (Westville) was at one stage going to be the only one which was examined. However, given the criticisms of the single case study, and my desire to explore phenomena outside of a single setting, I decided to seek evidence from two other institutions. The discourse around sampling often focusses on the process of sampling individual participants within the research (Curtis, *et al.*, 2000). However, Stake (cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.243) suggests that, if qualitative research requires cases to be chosen, then "...nothing is more important than making a proper selection of cases. It is a sampling problem." The research carried out within Westville is a clear example of convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is labelled as such because of the availability and accessibility such a method affords the researcher (Gravetter and Forzano, 2015). As I was employed by Westville and was familiar with the institution, it was an obvious location for the research study.

When selecting additional cases for the research, I was mindful of Miles and Huberman's (1994) advice that the researcher should consider feasibility in terms of the resource costs, both in terms of money and time, as well as the practical issues of accessibility, and whether the sampling strategy is compatible with the researcher's work style. To that end, the selection of Robbins and Mortown as locations for comparison was driven by my consideration of their location, and by virtue of my ability to gain access to research participants. At both locations, I had existing relationships with individuals who could facilitate my access to participants. Whilst a degree of



pragmatism was required in selecting the final two study locations, I am more than satisfied that the locations make a contribution to the rigour of the research.

Curtis, *et al.*, (2000) set out five considerations in respect of case study sampling. First, the case study selection should be relevant to the conceptual framework and the research questions. Second, the sample should be likely to generate rich information on the type of phenomena to be studied. Third, the sample should enhance the 'generalizability' of the findings. For qualitative samples, they distinguish between 'analytic generalizability' as opposed to statistical power to make statements about a general population on the basis of a sample. Fourth, the sample should produce believable descriptions/explanations, and by doing so, can enhance the reliability of the research. Finally, the selection should reflect sound ethical principles. Having considered these suggestions, the chosen case study locations appear entirely appropriate. Each of the institutions are post-92 universities, and as such will have undergone similar changes and experiences, and therefore provided a useful point of comparison.

### **5.3 Participants**

Section 4.6.3.1 describes my position as an inside researcher (at Westville). My previous and current role has afforded me the opportunity to make a number of connections within the primary institution. For the pilot study element of the research I was able to call upon pre-existing contacts to take part in interviews. This allowed me to refine the research questions and hone my interviewing skills. A number of the participants at Westville were contacted as a consequence of pre-existing relationships. From this point, snowball sampling (McNeill and Chapman, 2005) was used which gleaned further willing participants, with additional respondents sourced through contacts within the HR department and the trade union. Finally, prospective

participants were contacted by email, which resulted in further participants coming forward. At Robbins and Mortown, I was also able to make use of pre-existing contacts who facilitated introductions to willing participants.

The ability to build rapport, and engage in candid conversation was covered within the insider research section. Of the 28 participants that were interviewed, 11 were academic managers, 13 were managed academics, 2 were HR professionals and 2 were trade union representatives. Nine managers and nine non-managers were interviewed from Westville, as well as the two trade union representatives and two HR professionals. Much of the initial research was carried out at Westville, hence the wider sample. The research was then supplemented further by interviewing participants from Robbins and Mortown. At Robbins, three non-managers were interviewed and one manager. At Mortown, one manager and one non-manager were interviewed. Having access to participants from other institutions, though small in number, helped to test themes that were emerging from the Westville. Further information on the profile of the research participants is available in table 2 overleaf. Ideally, a balance between managerial and non-managerial staff would have been achieved but issues of accessibility prevented this. However, a number of assertions expressed from the managerial respondents were shared, and I am therefore confident that further participants would not have provided new insights.

The topic of data saturation is one which is frequently referred to as the gold standard in qualitative research (Saunders, et al., 2018). Definitions of data saturation vary considerably, and to boldly claim that data saturation has been achieved within this research would be open to question. However, Given (2016, p.135) defines saturation as a position where “additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes”. By considering saturation from the perspective of data analysis (and the termination of

data analysis – see Birks and Mills, 2015) rather than the collection of new data I feel more assured that a level of saturation has been achieved. Chapter 6 provides a detailed account of the data analysis and as this was an iterative process, it was clear as the research progressed that new themes were ceasing to emerge.

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>AM1</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	81 mins	12/09/16
<b>AM2</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	54 mins	22/06/16
<b>AM3</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	78 mins	29/07/16
<b>AM4</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	63 mins	14/07/16
<b>AM5</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	73 mins	15/12/16
<b>AM6</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	45 mins	04/04/17
<b>AM7</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	61 mins	24/03/17
<b>AM8</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	51 mins	09/05/17
<b>AM9</b>	Academic Manager	Westville	48 mins	12/05/17
<b>AM10</b>	Academic Manager	Mortown	57 mins	17/07/17
<b>AM11</b>	Academic Manager	Robbins	65 mins	05/09/17
<b>MA1</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	61 mins	13/10/16
<b>MA2</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	56 mins	01/07/16
<b>MA3</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	50 mins	05/12/16
<b>MA4</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	37 mins	21/11/16
<b>MA5</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	66 mins	07/11/16
<b>MA6</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	61 mins	21/11/16
<b>MA7</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	45 mins	10/01/16
<b>MA8</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	66 mins	11/04/16
<b>MA9</b>	Managed Academic	Westville	51 mins	12/05/17
<b>MA10</b>	Managed Academic	Mortown	54 mins	17/07/17
<b>MA11</b>	Managed Academic	Robbins	45 mins	05/09/17
<b>MA12</b>	Managed Academic	Robbins	76 mins	05/09/17
<b>MA13</b>	Managed Academic	Robbins	35 mins	05/09/17
<b>TU1</b>	Trade Union Representative	Westville	80 mins	05/12/17
<b>TU2</b>	Trade Union Representative	Westville	58 mins	10/01/17
<b>HR1</b>	Organisational Development	Westville	60 mins	10/02/17
<b>HR2</b>	Employee Relations	Westville	74 mins	10/02/17

**Table 2 – Details of Respondents**

## **5.4 Interviews**

The interview is the most commonly used method within qualitative research (Silverman, 2011). Discussion around the characterisation of interviews traditionally focus on the use of structured or unstructured interviews (Collins, 1998). A clear distinction between each type of interview is the way in which the interview questions are formulated and the extent to which the interviewer affords participants freedom within their replies to each interview question (Bryman 2012). Furthermore, the underpinning philosophical position of the researcher shapes the objectives of the interview, be it establishing absolute truths and facts (positivism) or by describing lived experiences of participants.

Initially, my approach to interviews was semi-structured. Topic guides were produced (available in appendix B), and a list of interview prompts were taken to each interview. This was done firstly to account for my relative inexperience as an interviewer and to ensure that topics were covered in order to maintain the research agenda. Over the course of the research the list of questions evolved (though not to the extent where the focus of the research shifted), but so too did my interview style. As my confidence with interviews and familiarity with the topic grew I was able to use a relatively unstructured approach, assured that the research topics would emerge using a more conversational style. It should be noted that whilst participants were provided with a research information sheet (Appendix A), they did not see the specific questions in advance of the interview. Silverman (2000) explains that researchers need to avoid contaminating their study by informing subjects too specifically in advance about the research questions to be studied.

As my bank of interview data grew, I was able to introduce topics for discussion using sentences such as: “a number of interviewees have reported issues with having

responsibility for staff without authority, how do you feel about that?” Whilst Gubrium and Holstein (2004) explain that interviews are collaboratively produced between interviewer and interviewee the extent to which I was active in the research through disclosing details of my own experience and in some instances answering questions posed to me by interviewees meant that descriptions were co-constructed between myself and the interviewee. This was particularly true where participants were keen to hear of the experience of others, when grappling with their own issues around the management of performance and perhaps looking for insight and guidance. Furthermore the notion of co-construction is in line with the aforementioned philosophical position adopted within the research, as I believe reality to be a social construct (Collis and Hussey, 2003). A constructionist perspective means that data collected through the interview is considered as constructed by both the interviewer and the research participant, rather than via the participants individual reflections of reality (Smith, 2007).

Nonetheless, having question prompts remained helpful when engaging in a conversational style, as these helped to ensure that some consistency was achieved in terms of the topics covered, although inevitably interviews often went in different directions. Rapley (2004) explains that the interviewer, whilst conversational, also has the ability to exercise a level of control throughout the interview by deciding when to probe further and open the conversation, or when to close topics down and move on. Furthermore, Crotty (1998) explains that during conversation meaning can be made of experiences, and individual’s perceptions and insights can be unearthed and explored: “Only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, and feeling and attitudes of others and interpret their meaning and intent” (p.78). Occasionally topics which were not directly related to the research were touched upon

and discussed, often as a means of maintaining rapport. The building of rapport was crucial as not only did this helped me to empathise with participants but also enabled me to understand the world in the same way (Chua, *et al.*, 2008). This led to candid accounts being provided and a sense that the co-constructed data was captured accurately.

## **5.5 Data Collection**

The research was conducted over a 2 year period between January 2016 and December 2017. Whilst this time period allowed for early analysis of the initial data, the two year period of data collection was, at times, problematic. There were numerous challenges when attempting to access participants, particularly when trying to make introductions via email. I could easily have reached the same number of participants if I had utilised pre-existing contacts from a faculty in which I knew most staff. However, in wanting to achieve a rounder picture of issues within (and outside) the institution, it was necessary to seek participants from a wider number of settings. On reflection, the two-year period of data collection meant that I had to review existing interviews and research questions to try to achieve consistency in the style of each interviewer. Whilst this was achieved, the confidence I had developed as an interviewer through having a number of interviews close together was compromised on occasions when there were gaps of a few months between clusters of participants. However, as there was a variety in terms of application of performance management across faculties, I felt it was important that this was captured in order to represent the case study more fully, despite the additional time challenges that were presented. I was also aware that issues of accessibility would potentially be problematic and this was compounded by sector specific issues, not least the academic calendar meaning that potential participants were busy during term time and often entirely absent during half term and

the summer break. Of course the sample cannot hope to represent the entire employee populace, but I felt assured that several key themes emerged consistently. By triangulating findings between the primary case study (Westville) and two further case study institutions (Mortown and Robbins) I hoped that a wider picture of performance management practices in HE would emerge. Whilst extending the research beyond a single case study would still not make the findings generalizable, it was felt that this approach would increase rigour (Silverman, 2011).

## **5.6 Research Ethics**

Research ethics is defined as: “a code of behaviour in relation to the rights of those whom become subject of your work or are affected by it” (Wells, 1994 in Anderson, 2004, p.959). I was keenly aware of my responsibilities in conducting this research in a transparent and ethical manner. The research required a submission to the faculty’s ethics committee and full compliance with the university’s research ethics policy and statement. After two revisions, an approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the duration of the study. This process, though painstaking at the time actually enabled me to fully and comprehensively consider the ethical implications of my research and allowed me to plan for and anticipate ethical issues which might arise (Cresswell, 2013).

According to Saunders, *et al.*, (2012), an ethical approval is particularly needed in research participated in by young or vulnerable persons. Whilst the notion of vulnerability is inherently subjective it is possible that research participants might consider themselves as vulnerable, given my aforementioned position as an inside researcher and because of a number of factors around changes to the sector, such as perceptions around heightened student expectations, and in some cases, a fear of

redundancy. A further consideration within this research is protection from harm, in the context of this research such protection could extend to issues around the potentially emotive subject matter, particularly if participants recall instances which resulted in negative outcomes or conflict. Bryman and Bell (2011) assert that protection from harm covers matters which might cause conflict or negatively affect self-esteem. Some of the issues within this research led to participants recounting tales when they were labelled as racist or felt bullied. Clearly, these are issues which could expose participants to emotional harm, as such my ability as an interviewer, levels of emotional intelligence, tact and diplomacy were vital.

In advance of the interviews, I provided all participants with a detailed overview of the nature and purpose of the research and they were reminded of their ability to withdraw from the research at any time. Each participant signed a consent form before the interviews commenced (a blank copy is provided in Appendix C).

One of the most challenging areas of the research was to ensure confidence in the participants that all information would be treated confidentially and that their anonymity would be guaranteed. To this end, even my supervisory team were unaware of who was being interviewed, and as can be seen throughout this thesis, the institutions names are fictitious and participants are only identified as 'Managed Academic 1' or 'Academic Manager 2' and so on. Furthermore, any identifying features mentioned within the narratives captured have also been amended and where names are required for the purpose of sentence coherence, pseudonyms have been used.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

Whilst chapter four explored a number of approaches within the methodological discourse, this chapter has been far more practically focussed in articulating the



decisions that I made and the approach that I followed throughout this research. It has provided a clear explanation and rationale for the chosen data collection method of interviews and provided a detailed description of the participants who took part within this study. This explored not only the role of the participants employed, but the strategy for identifying and contacting the participants.

Information was also provided around the process of data collection, including the time scale for this research and some of the barriers and issues that were encountered during the research.

The chapter has explored the topic of research ethics – an area of vital importance in all research but something that I perceived as particularly important given my pre-existing relationships with some of the participants and to my ongoing position as an associate lecturer within the primary case study.

Finally, a brief description of the three case study institutions within this research was presented as a means of developing the understanding of the reader.

Having presented the methodological underpinnings of this research and the chosen methods which were used, my attention will now turn to providing a detailed account of the data analysis phase of the research.

## **CHAPTER SIX: DATA ANALYSIS**

### **6.0 Introduction**

Holloway and Todres (2003) explain that there are a variety of techniques available to researchers for the analysis of qualitative data and that these are diverse, complex and nuanced. Thematic analysis has been used within this research. Braun and Clarke (2008) contend that thematic analysis is often considered part of a process within widely established analysis methods, such as discourse analysis (Willig, 2003), narrative analysis (Murray, 2003), content analysis (Silverman, 2009) and grounded theory (Silverman, 2009 and Strauss and Corbin, 1998). They argue that thematic analysis is instead a specific approach in its own right. When determining an appropriate method for analysing the data gleaned from this research it became apparent that each method of analysis shared a number of similar properties. Indeed Braun and Clarke (2008) discuss that thematic analysis is often claimed to be something else, and is poorly 'branded' as a method.

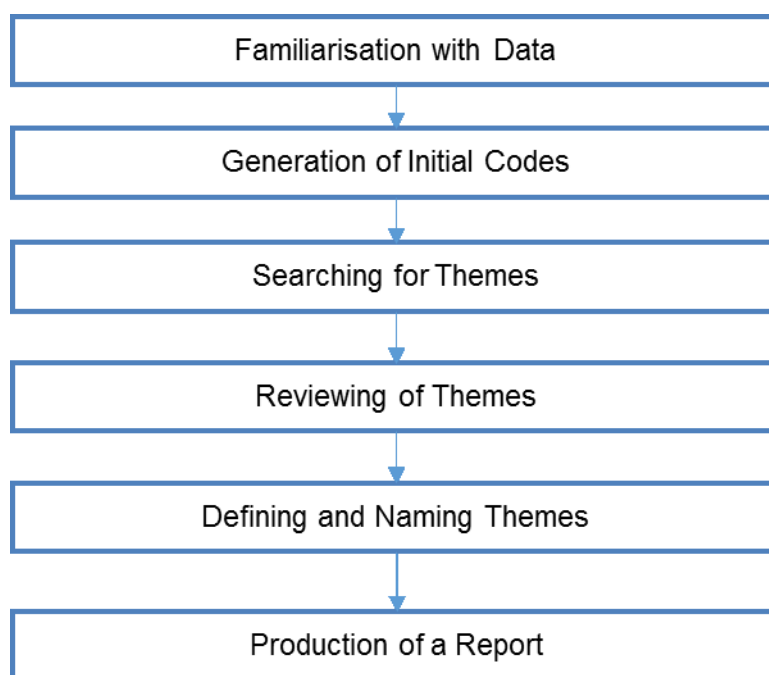
As with a number of areas within the methodological discourse, terms relating to data analysis are used interchangeably and a continuum appears to exist between the different analytical methods, many of which are nuanced in application. In support of this, Silverman (2009) contends that all effective data analysis methods have much in common. Furthermore, Silverman (2009) and Rapley (2011) argue that researchers tag their approach using common approaches, and fail to use theory thoroughly and well. Braun and Clarke (2008) explain that research is more easily compared, synthesised and evaluated when clarity is provided on how the analysis was approached and the assumptions that informed the analysis.

The identification of themes within this research was generated from the transcripts and was therefore data driven, following a largely inductive approach (Patton, 1990). The inductive label is applied with the same caveat as described earlier with reference to Howell's (2013) suggestion of a continuum existing between deductive and inductive approaches. Before describing the approach to analysis, a further decision around the thematic approach should be explained. Boyatzis (1998) describes identification at a semantic or explicit level, or a latent or interpretive level. The semantic level is described as a surface level, in which researchers do not look for anything beyond what participants explain (Braun and Clarke, 2008). The latent level considers underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations which I am certainly interested in exploring, and as such my interpretation is required. This approach is clearly aligned to the constructionist paradigm (Burr, 1995). The following passage explains the process of analysis.

The recorded and transcribed interviews generated a large amount of text. The data analysis involved the use of Nvivo, and like so much of this research thesis, was an iterative process. Coding and analysis was done in unison with data collection, usually in batches. For example, after the first 11 interviews a round of analysis was carried out, which enabled me to establish a number of initial themes, which were used as codes with Nvivo. Analysing data at an early point in the research is an approach recommended by Silverman (2009) who explains that this allows the researcher to engage in 'intensive analysis' which enables a firm grasp of the phenomena. The initial attempt at categorising the data took the form of a spider diagram. This exercise was useful, as not only did it provide a methodical manner to organise the data that had been gathered, but it also focussed my mind on what were perceived to be the key issues that were emerging, which in turn benefited the approach taken to future

interviews. For example, the system of appraisal (i.e. the policy and procedure), although critiqued by some participants, did not appear to be one of the more compelling areas of interest to either academic managers or managed academics.

Returning to Braun and Clarke's (2008) assertion that clarity within the analysis process should be provided, what follows is a detailed account of the steps taken within the thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's six stages (displayed below in figure 5). Patton (1990) explains that qualitative analysis guidelines should be treated as such, they require flexibility to ensure the appropriate fit with the research questions and data, and should not be considered as absolute rules. When approaching each stage, it is important to recognise that the analysis does not necessarily flow vertically as the figure below might suggest; instead stages will be returned to in a 'recursive' pattern (Braun and Clarke, 2008).



**Figure 5 - Stages of Thematic Analysis**

## 6.1 Stage 1 – Familiarisation with Data.

Braun and Clarke (2008) recommend that researchers should immerse themselves with data in order to understand the depth and breadth of what has been captured. It is suggested that repeated reading is required, supported by note taking and the marking of ideas. I found this part of the process helpful, but additionally found listening to the recordings incredibly beneficial as well. A process of listening whilst reading also helped to understand the tone and context in which participants described their opinions. Gale *et al.*, (2013) explain that using both audio and transcription is vital in order to achieve familiarisation. Great time and effort was put into the recursive process of reading, listening and note taking in order to achieve familiarisation. I viewed this as particularly important as I did not transcribe the interviews myself; this was done by a professional company, due to my own limitations in terms of both typing speed and my time. Whilst the transcriptions were verbatim, they did not include every pause, cough, um, laugh and so on, unless I thought this to be particularly relevant. Stuckey, (2014) explains that “fillers” are often not included within qualitative approaches, unless discourse analysis is used, as the focus is instead on the accuracy of the data content.

Several authors attest to the value of researchers transcribing their own data, as a means of staying immersed with the data (Tilley, 2003 and Markle, *et al.*, 2011). However, the time consuming nature of transcription is also recognised as causing delays to research (Roulston, *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, a pragmatic decision was taken, as I felt that my time was better spent interrogating the transcripts rather than producing them. Braun and Clarke (2008) contend that it is important for researchers who do not transcribe their own research to spend longer listening to recorded audio and re-reading transcripts. Listening to recordings of interviews whilst reading the

transcript meant that inflections could be attended to (Stuckey, 2014), without this, the context of the written word is entirely lost and could lead to lack of accuracy when presenting findings. I felt this was important to consider, particularly where participants were emphasising issues they felt strongly about, or at times, when sarcasm was used when describing experiences. Poland, (2002, p.632) explains that punctuation can also alter the meaning of data – and uses the following example 'I hate it, you know. I do' versus 'I hate it. You know I do'.

During the reading of transcripts and listening of accompanying audio, notes of my initial thoughts and ideas were taken. Initially, this was not done in a particularly methodical way, but instead captured some early interpretations of the data. These early notes formed the basis of a more considered approach to beginning to capturing themes. Additionally, the transcripts were imported into Nvivo 11 and areas that I perceived to be key were highlighted electronically using the Nvivo functionality.

## **6.2 Stage 2 - Generation of Initial Codes**

Initial codes were generated following the completion of the first eleven interviews. This represented just over a third of the study and felt like an appropriate time to begin determining the codes to be used for organising data. Saldana (2016) advises to start coding as you collect and format data and not once the fieldwork is completed. The coding process was however iterative, and evolved as more interviews were completed, and a greater sense of appropriate labels emerged. The iterative nature did not mean that data within codes were removed; however, they were often amalgamated with other codes, or renamed. The initial process also moved beyond coding at times, and began to search for themes. The iterative process allowed for corrections of this flawed approach. Saldana (2016) challenges advice that

researchers should “code for themes” and suggests that this muddies the waters for researchers. On reflection, this was the position I almost found myself in initially. Instead, Saldana (ibid) makes a clear distinction suggesting that a code can be a single word, whereas a theme is likely to be a sentence. The following example makes this explicit: “*Security*” can be a code, but “*A false sense of security*” can be a theme (Saldana, ibid, p16). In the context of my own research “Culture” was made an initial code; however it was apparent that several codes contributed to the notion of what I had initially labelled as culture, such as “collegiality” and “autonomy” which therefore led to the creation of a *theme* that I instead called “the academic environment”. Saldana, (ibid) describes a theme as an outcome of coding, categorisation and reflection; coding is also considered to be the first phase of data analysis (Tuckett, 2005) and data reduction (Miles and Huberman 1994).

When initially coding, by copying smaller chunks of data under particular headings, statements that I found meaningful and of interest initially seemed to lack value when looked at in isolation, particularly after some time away from the analysis. The “juicy bits” I had initially identified were either hard to understand, or didn’t seem as “juicy”. I realised that surrounding data needed to be included in order to capture context and to explain the train of thought of respondents and the trail of the conversation. Bryman (2001) explains that extracts should be coded inclusively, by capturing surrounding data. He explains that a common criticism is that context is lost by coding exclusively. This was certainly the case with my initial coding efforts, which required me to revisit the data and on occasions include far more of the conversation than I had initially intended. Whilst this undoubtedly added context, and was necessary, it did mean that identifying areas relevant to the particular code required a further means of

identification. Therefore, key sentences were highlighted within the larger passages of text so that they stood out clearly within their code.

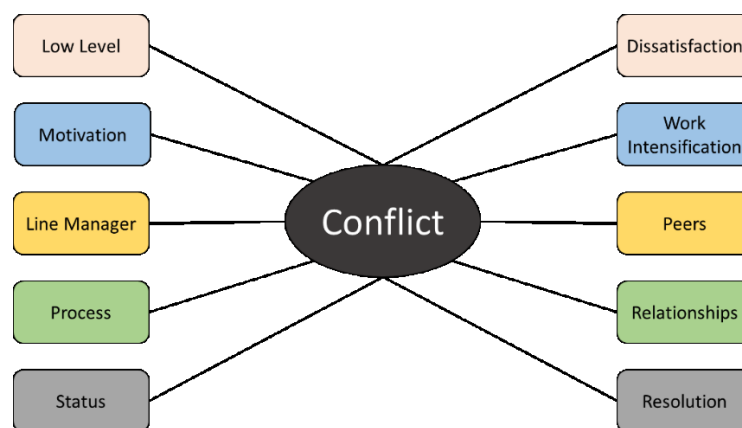
Braun and Clarke, (2008) recommend that codes should be retained which depart from the initial dominant story in the analysis, and highlight the importance of not ignoring tensions and inconsistencies within the data. This view is supported by Saldana, (2012, p.15) who asserts that: "The danger is that the portions deleted might contain the as yet unknown units of data that could pull everything together, or include the negative case that motivates a rethinking of a code, category, theme, concept, theory, or assertion." This was valuable knowledge, and in taking a disciplined approach in this regard, I was reminded to avoid looking for data that served to only reinforce that which had already been identified. This process also returned me to notions of "bracketing" (Starks and Trinidad, 2007; Tufford and Newman, 2012), and was a further means of ensuring that I wasn't biased in looking for issues that I wanted to find, and thus neglecting what the data was actually presenting. Resulting themes as a consequence of this practice helped to produce a more accurate and holistic account of performance management within the institutions concerned.

### **6.3 Stage 3 - Searching for Themes**

Braun and Clarke (2008) suggest that themes should be searched for once all data has been coded and collated. I began to search for themes after completing coding for 22 transcribed interviews; this represented more than two thirds of the primary research. However, Braun and Clarke (ibid) also recognise that the analysis process is one which is recursive, as such it was useful to begin to identify themes after two thirds of the data had been collected, and I was able to build on and amend themes as new data was ingested. There were practical reasons around accessibility to



participants that also meant that the initial coding and search for themes took place before all the data was available. Braun and Clarke (ibid, p.14) suggest that “It may be helpful at this phase to use visual representations to help you sort the different codes into themes”. I did indeed find this beneficial, and used the maps facility within Nvivo 11 to produce several conceptualisations of themes. The example below provides an illustration of the theme of conflict and how numerous sub-themes contributed to this.



**Figure 6 A visual illustration of the thematic map, showing the theme of conflict**

Braun and Clarke (ibid) explain that codes can go onto become themes (which was the case for conflict) whilst others become sub-themes and other codes, might not appear to have a natural “fit”. In order to identify themes, I opened and read all of the 40 codes stored in the NVivo 11 and created a thematic map of the main themes that were identified.

The initial trends that became apparent from these codes have been expressed in the following illustrations (not including conflict, which is represented in figure 6).

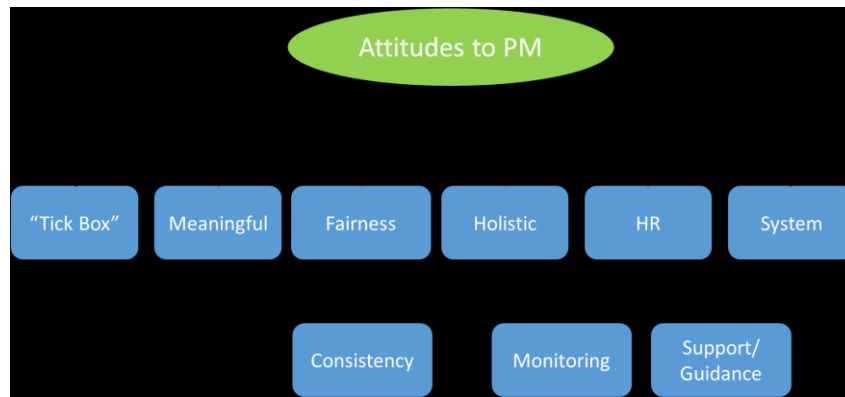


Figure 7 – Initial Thematic Map – Attitudes to Performance Management

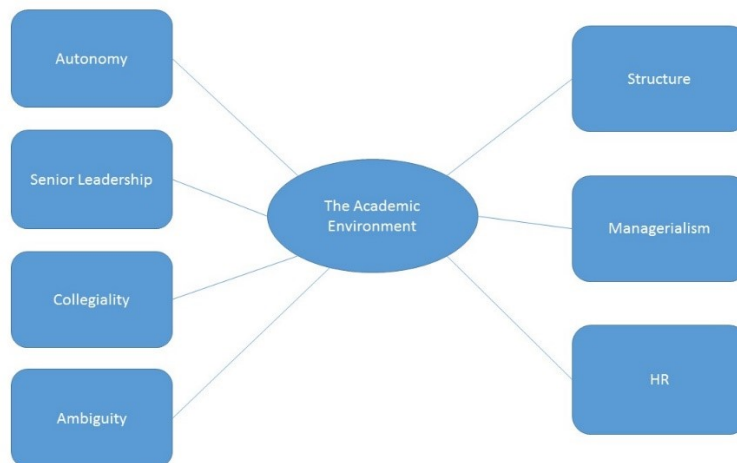


Figure 8 – Initial Thematic Map – The Academic Environment

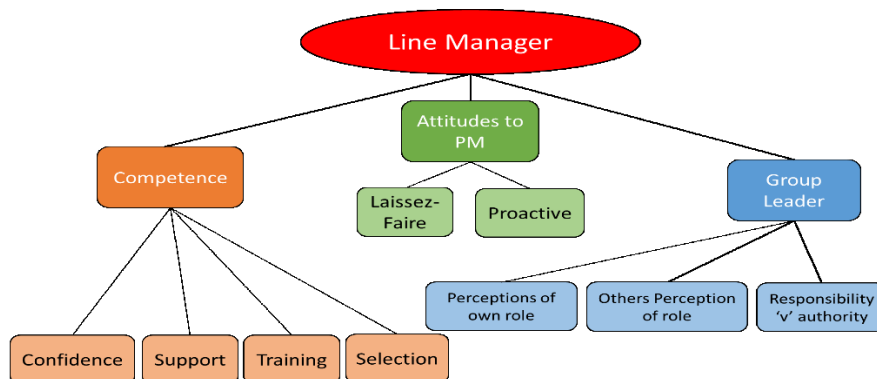


Figure 9 - Initial Thematic Map – Line Manager

From figures 6 to 9, the emerging themes of this study were considered to be conflict, attitudes to performance management, the academic environment, and line management. Having established these initial themes, I made significant progress within the data categorisation phase, and the data felt far more manageable, albeit with some further refinement.

#### **6.4 Stage 4 - Reviewing of Themes**

Braun and Clarke, (2008) explain that stage four of the data analysis involves the refining of existing candidate themes, and contend that during this phase it might become clear that some candidate themes are not actually themes, as there may be insufficient data to support them, whilst others might be merged or separated (hence the use of the term candidate). They also explain that this phase of the process should be conducted in two phases:

- Phase one should involve reviewing at the level of the coded data set. All collated extracts for each theme therefore need to be read, to ensure that there is a coherent pattern.

When reviewing data at this level, it was apparent that some of the codes did not in fact form a coherent pattern. Braun and Clarke (ibid, p.91) advise that: "If your candidate themes do not fit, you will need to consider whether the theme itself is problematic, or whether some of the data extracts within it simply do not fit there."

This process helped to categorise the data further, and clarified with greater accuracy the true nature of the themes at play within the research. For example, I felt that it was appropriate to have a theme around leadership and management, which encompassed senior leaders, line managers and notions of managerialism. Figure 7 and 8 show these as separate candidate themes, where in truth it became clear that

data contained within these topics actually formed a more substantive theme around "management". Furthermore, data within the "managerialism" code was muddled, and contained issues around the ideology of managerialism, as well as practical issues of measurement and data. As such, this code was retained, but the data within the code was re-organised as a means of achieving consistency and understanding of "managerialism". Braun and Clarke (ibid, p.91) explain that: "Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes". The reviewing of themes provided more obvious combinations of meaningful themes and certainly provided greater clarity in terms of distinguishing between specific themes, and the data that contributed to the codes within these themes. The previous separation of senior leadership from line managers represents a good example of some misalignment, and blurring of lines, which this stage of the analysis helped me to identify and remedy.

Once candidate themes formed a coherent pattern, the second phase of reviewing of themes could be addressed:

- At this level, the validity of individual themes are determined in relation to the whole data set. Furthermore, the extent to which the candidate thematic map 'accurately' reflects the meanings evident in the data set as is considered.

Phase two therefore required the whole data set to be re-read. As above, this is to consider whether the themes are representative of the whole data set, and also provides an opportunity to code (or re-code) any data that might have been missed during the earlier phases (Braun and Clarke, ibid). Following this approach is very much in line with the iterative approach that has been adopted within the data collection and data analysis phase of the research.

As a consequence of reviewing data through coded extracts in Nvivo 11 the initial themes presented in figure 6 – 9 were amended to form a more coherent pattern (Braun and Clarke, *ibid*). Following the completion of stage four, I was satisfied that an overall story of the data was developed. Consequently, the analysis progresses to stage five: the defining and naming of themes.

### **6.5 Stage 5 - Defining and Naming Themes**

Themes within this stage of analysis are considered with a view to examining the inherent data within each theme (Braun and Clarke, *ibid*). This process involves revisiting data within each theme and organising data in a coherent fashion that provides a consistent narrative. To some extent, this aspect of the analysis section is similar to the much more detailed findings section, which will be reported in Chapter Seven. What follows is a description of the three candidate themes, with a discussion of those sub themes which contribute to the substantive themes. Braun and Clarke (*ibid*) explain that sub-themes are useful for giving structure to complex themes and for demonstrating the “hierarchy of meaning” within the data (p.92). This is useful advice as the three substantive themes are undoubtedly the result of numerous sub-themes that contribute to the identification of the overarching narratives within the data. Braun and Clarke (2008) explain that themes chosen should be given names which are concise and give the reader a clear sense of what the theme is about. Furthermore, they contend that the researcher should provide a detailed analysis for each theme that identifies the story within each theme and how this contributes to the broader, overall story of the data, and relates to the research questions.

I have chosen to provide a brief summary of the constituent themes within the data, each of which will be attended to in far greater detail in the findings chapter, which

Braun and Clarke (ibid) describe as the final part of the data analysis – production of a report. What follows therefore, is a summary of each of the themes which are present within the data.

### **6.5.1 The Academic Environment**

This theme captured a number of sub-themes that gave an indication to the culture within the primary case study institution, but also included evidence from the two comparator institutions. The sub-themes, which contribute to this theme, are discussed individually below:

#### **6.5.1.1 Autonomy**

The topic of autonomy was one of the more compelling topics that contributed to the theme of the academic environment. There was recognition that many academics entered the profession because of the autonomy they were afforded. Some respondents suggested that their autonomy had been reduced, whilst others reported that this was more static, despite the apparent increases in metrics and league tables. Academic managers suggested that allowing staff flexibility was seen as some kind of reward, in the absence of being able to give anything more tangible.

The challenges of resistance to measures which were seen as reducing autonomy were mentioned, as well as the difficulty in managing highly autonomous individuals. The importance of autonomy with responsibility was mentioned on a couple of occasions with a sense that this was lacking and therefore troublesome to address. Surprisingly, some managed academic staff welcomed the tightening up of procedures and felt that autonomy should be reduced, particularly for those staff whom it was felt were underperforming without any consequences, or where concerns for equity were raised.

#### **6.5.1.2 Collegiality**

Perceptions about the continued culture of collegiality in institutions were varied. Managers reported that whilst collegiality remained, managerial systems were increasingly in place and subsequently the clash between the two was problematic. Collegiate cultures were also seen as key to manager's reluctance to tackle performance issues, or engage with formal processes.

Others reported collegiality with colleagues in the same department, but not at school level, whilst another manager believed that collegiality was alive and well not just at the local level, but at the sector level. Finally, efficiency savings at Mortown meant that individuals lost colleagues with similar research interests and as such struggled to maintain momentum behind initiatives. Furthermore, at Westville, it was explained that individual successes, such as publications were rewarded, and that as such the working environment had become increasingly individualised, as it was felt that team work was not rewarded, which in turn diminished collegiality.

#### **6.5.1.3 HR Involvement**

Accounts of the role of HR within the performance appraisal process, and of issues as a consequence of tackling performance were generally framed in a negative light. It was consistently reported that the HR department were interested in receiving details of the performance appraisal rating that was given (or evidence the appraisal was completed), but did not request, or have sight of, any of the objectives that were agreed, developmental areas, or the more qualitative aspects of discussions. This was a fact which one of the HR practitioners acknowledged and suggested could be addressed in the future. Currently the role of HR appeared to compound perceptions (of some) that the performance appraisal was a "tick box" exercise

There were also reports that HR business partners would only speak to senior managers about people management issues, which again eroded a sense of authority of those with devolved responsibility. Furthermore, there was a general sense that the HR department were risk averse when tackling individuals who had been identified as having performance issues. This compounded managerial reluctance when faced with addressing performance concerns.

#### **6.5.1.4 Status**

The issue of status is an important one, and contributes to the following section around structure. It is however a complex ingredient and therefore worthy of being a standalone sub-theme. The status-laden nature of relationships, particularly in Westville, had significant implications for the way in which performance was (or was not) managed. For example, often those in positions such as head of subject were not professors, yet had to allocate work and occasionally evaluate the performance of professors and other staff who enjoyed higher organisational status. Heavy emphasis is therefore placed on individuals within such positions, and the extent to which they are prepared to address issues in spite of their perceived reduced status. One manager (from Mortown) remarked that they would tackle issues regardless of this, and felt he would have the backing of the dean in doing so. Other respondents from Westville suggested they would be less willing and less able to rely on support from a head of school in doing so. The result therefore tended to be that discussions around performance were often avoided, and that ratings were inflated to avoid difficulties.

This is a unique phenomenon to sectors such as higher education. In traditional organisations, those with management responsibility have the authority to manage performance (and other people management activities) and are afforded the status to



do so through hierarchical position over sub-ordinates. The interplay between status and the following section on structure is therefore complex and of pivotal importance to this research.

#### **6.5.1.5 Structure**

The structures in all three institutions had implications for the management of performance. Mortown, the smallest of the institutions seemed most adept at dealing with this issue, arguably because of scale, but also because those responsible for performance discussions had formal line management responsibility and the authority to address issues. Furthermore, they were able to have a holistic view of their employee's performance, again presumably due to the scale of the institution and the fact that the institution was primarily focussed on teaching. Robbins appeared to have formalised management structures, yet those responsible for the appraisal would still arguably not be able to assess, or indeed be interested in assessing every aspect of the multifaceted academic role.

The matrix structure means that academics have numerous reporting lines and that the appraisal process is counter to the prescriptive literature, as it is difficult to make a holistic assessment of performance. This has obvious implications, as underperformance might not be adequately captured and nor may issues of competing deadlines and work intensification.

Westville had similar issues, which compounded a lack of managerial authority and capability (such issues are addressed in section 6.5.2).

## **6.5.2 Management**

The theme of management is one with numerous sub-themes covering a range of practical issues, notions of managerialism, recognition for management, and issues such as favouritism and bias.

### **6.5.2.1 Competence, Confidence, Selection, Support and Training**

A lack of managerial confidence was recognised as a key inhibitor when considering the extent to which managers were prepared to take action, particularly around performance issues. This manifested itself due to a number of reasons, a particular concern being the negative reactions of staff who had their performance questioned. Some of these issues have been discussed within the conflict theme, but had negative consequences for managerial confidence in persevering with capability or disciplinary processes in the face of recriminations and grievances. Furthermore, HR respondents explained that they believed a lack of confidence meant that issues were not tackled in a timely, informal manner initially, which consequently led to the use of formal processes

Confidence was closely linked to people management competence and managerial experience. There was a wide range of opinion in relation to the selection of academic staff to management positions. Often, no consideration was given for the managerial element of the role, often this came as a bi-product of promotion, and as a consequence of research excellence. Westville provided examples whereby individuals found themselves in managerial positions without interviewing for the post, and without consideration for their suitability as people managers. This was compounded by a lack of training, with the exception of procedural aspects of the

business such as appraisal and recruitment. Soft skill development was rarely considered.

Mortown and Robbins gave much more attention to these aspects of the role, and people management competence was a clear consideration. Furthermore, management positions in these institutions were substantive, and managers interviewed (and their staff) reported that line managers had responsibility and authority to manage their departments. Whilst this did entirely remove some of the people and performance management challenges, there appeared to be an organisational interest and recognition of the potential skill set required for managerial appointments.

This theme captures information from participants around the ideology of managerialism within the case study institutions. The presence of a clear set of performance management practices within each institution points to an increasing adoption of managerialist principles. The extent to which managerialism has been imposed upon the HE sector will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven. What is captured in this summary is the use of data and evidence as well as issues of ambiguity when attempting to measure and manage academic performance.

There was some evidence of more managerialist approaches across the institutions, although at times there appeared to be a disconnect between the rhetoric of both managerialism and performance management in the institutions and the reality that the actors involved in the research experienced. For example, objectives were set in one faculty by the Dean, and these were cascaded to staff in the respective schools as per the prescriptive MBO literature. However, these were perceived as a “mismatch” between school objectives and departmental priorities. Furthermore, performance

against these objectives were not scrutinised by heads of school or the Dean rendering them slightly meaningless.

At Westville, there were some limited examples that suggested some effort was made at measuring and evaluating performance, but generally it appeared that opportunities were missed. For example, teaching performance was generally regarded as challenging to measure, and yet module evaluations, which could help to illuminate teaching performance, were not gathered or analysed in a consistent or meaningful manner. In part, it was felt that there was a lack of pressure from senior managers to proactively address performance.

It was also reported that together with increasing competition for students, that bodies such as the QAA had meant that trust in individuals had reduced, and that performance was under more scrutiny in order to satisfy internal audits and external bodies.

Respondents from Mortown and Robbins reported greater experience of discussions around targets and there appeared to be more clarity around expectations. However, there was still a sense that some ambiguity prevailed in these settings.

#### **6.5.2.3 Managers - Recognition, Reluctance and Responsibility**

The theme of managers considers how they are perceived by those individuals that they have responsibility for. In particular, it explores whether those individuals view their 'managers' as having the authority to manage and direct their performance. Furthermore the theme tackles the issues which lead to managerial reluctance and analyses the extent to which managers perceive themselves to have the responsibility and *authority* to discharge their people management roles.

On the topic of managerial recognition, there was a degree of variation in the perceptions of participants. Some managers remarked that staff in their group might

not perceive them as the manager, some felt they would select the head of school, and others felt that the employee might say they didn't have a manager at all. The lack of recognition for the managerial role is therefore one with inherent tensions and, particularly in Westville, managers felt that they were given significant responsibility but had little authority.

Robbins and Mortown had clearer structures and more visible reporting lines. In Mortown, this meant that managers claimed that they were prepared to tackle poor performance, however, this was not necessarily reflected by responses from managed academics. In the case of Robbins there was some evidence of performance discussions, but again, there was a reluctance to address difficult issues. This was also true of Westville, where a lack of hard performance measures led managers to shy away from addressing performance concerns. Finally, the cultures of collegiality also played a role in managers not wishing to address under performance.

#### **6.5.2.4 The role of Senior Leaders**

Respondents at Mortown reported that senior leaders were interested in the performance of individuals and would proactively scrutinise appraisal discussion documents. The (small) scale of the institution is important here, and inevitably plays a part in the Dean's ability to have an understanding of performance, however this should not diminish the positive intent and involvement in the system. This in turn arguably gives the appraisal discussion more meaning and value.

For Westville, opinion was more varied and heads of school were often ambivalent to the performance appraisal, with one instance of a head of school offering to conduct an appraisal over email, and not seeking evidence of any discussion where the appraisals were devolved. In another faculty, much more interest was taken in

academic performance and a sense that support would be given to managers when addressing performance concerns. Those that received backing and support also felt a greater sense of pressure from senior leaders to manage performance, whilst where a more laissez-faire approach existed, there was no sense of managerial pressure. Where there was an absence of pressure and support, reluctant managers were provided with ample opportunity to avoid tackling issues.

Interestingly in Westville one HR respondent reported that faculties had a “set up” meeting to discuss the forthcoming round of appraisal discussions and a “close down” meeting to capture results of those discussions. However, managers interviewed in one faculty reported that the “close down” discussion did not take place. The practitioner described that the intention in future would be to “challenge” Deans and heads of school who returned individual performance ratings that did not reflect the available data and performance in relation to metrics such as NSS, and league table performance. The other HR respondent indicated that senior managers were “wary of (...) risks” when supporting managers to tackle performance issues, pointing to risk averse culture within Westville. In Robbins, where recruitment and selection processes appeared more robust, and considered people management competence, one respondent described senior managers as having “good knowledge, they’re visible, they’re very approachable and I think they’re all good appointments”.

There are clearly some differences in approaches of senior managers between institutions, which could arguably be impacted in part at least, by approaches to recruitment and selection practices, and therefore managerial competence.

### **6.5.2.5 The Performance Management System**

The performance management systems across the three institutions appeared to be very similar. Interestingly, Westville was the only one which required managers to give a performance rating, yet paradoxically, this institution appeared to have the least robust approach to the management of performance. Matrix structures were present in each of the institutions, and this was particularly the case for Westville and Robbins. This had implications for the performance management system, as notions of holistic accounts of individual performance which are espoused in the literature appear to be lacking in practice. Academic managers reported a lack of information on all aspects of academic performance. A number of managers remarked that they felt the systems they were using (across all three institutions) did not facilitate any kind of reward element. It was felt that this undermined the system and had negative connotations for those whom were performing above performance expectations. Similarly, requests for developmental opportunities or funding for conference attendance (for example) could not be facilitated through existing systems. Such practices are again counter to the more prescriptive performance. There were also instances where manager and employee would circumvent the system and have relatively informal conversations which would then be retro-fitted to the performance appraisal paperwork. On numerous occasions, particularly in Westville, the appraisal was referred to as a tick box exercise.

### **6.5.3 Conflict**

This theme captures the factors which contribute to episodes which could be framed as conflict. Conflict in this context deals with both traditional notions of inter-personal conflict as well as acknowledging the position of Purcell (2014) whom describes issues

of engagement and the portrayal as non-engaged staff, which “airbrushes out” issues of conflict. The sub-themes that contribute to the main theme of conflict will each be described below:

#### **6.5.3.1 Dissatisfaction**

This theme has been used to capture data in relation to the issue raised above by Purcell (2014) - that issues which may not be categorised at the organisational level as conflict, are in fact such, but instead re-framed as disengagement. This sub-theme therefore attends to reports of low morale, staff leaving the organisation prematurely, issues of stress and lack of support.

This sub-theme in many ways captures the more nebulous ways in which “dissatisfaction” was presented within the research. More proximate issues were also captured and are detailed below.

#### **6.5.3.2 Motivation**

Issues around motivation, or a lack of motivation as a consequence of conflict were captured here. This theme discussed employee motivation, which on occasions captured data that reported high levels of motivation. Often this was framed by respondents as motivation *in spite* of organisational factors, rather than *because* of them. Often motivation was described as coming from within, and due to concern for student experience, professional pride and interest in their topic, rather than managerial interventions or organisational support. Managers also expressed frustration at not being able to reward those whom were over-performing or taking on additional responsibility and therefore their subsequent concern that reliance on good-will could mean that levels of motivation might diminish. A lack of reward and recognition was also cited by managed academic staff.



### **6.5.3.3 Workload**

The topic of workload was a highly emotive one. There was a variety of opinion offered, around the topic, with managers often recognising the workload of staff had increased, both managers and staff agreed that workload allocation models did not sufficiently capture the whole gamut of academic work. Others suggested that they were comfortable with the current workload and that it was manageable. Interestingly, those in management positions, either people management or programme management, felt that the time given for such activities was insufficient. In the context of people management, a lack of time to perform the function effectively is an issue which reflects the literature review

Furthermore, and perhaps uniquely to the sector, there was a sense that managers did not have a full understanding of the academic role, often those that were conducting appraisals for example were interested only in teaching or research, but not both. The problems this causes for the management of performance will be addressed later, but this lack of appreciation also had implications for individual's workloads.

The topic of workload allocation models led to wider discussions around transparency, which also caused unrest within the workplace. Either because of genuine cases of work intensification, or through concerns for inequity and fairness.

### **6.5.3.4 Line Manager/Employee Relationship**

The relationship between manager and employee was an interesting topic. One manager described the process of trying to manage the performance of a member of staff as "excruciating" whilst others have found relations have been ok, but only due to the individuals involved. Where this was the case, the managers remarked that

they could see handling performance issues with other members of the team would be problematic. One of the HR advisor's described the difficulties, and at times reluctance of managers to enter into formal processes, they also explained that when performance concerns were raised, either formally or informally, that employees would often respond with accusations of victimisation or bullying "at some point during that process there will be something like that raised". Furthermore, they explained that managers often faced accusations and that managers were exposed to "bullying upwards", an assertion supported voluntarily by another academic manager. As a consequence managers often avoided tackling issues, due to the intensive processes and emotive reaction of the staff concerned. Other staff spoke positively about their experience of performance management processes and the developmental role that their managers played. Clearly, and unsurprisingly, relations between manager and employee was a highly subjective issue.

#### **6.5.3.5 Relationships with Colleagues**

This theme concerned issues between peers rather than those which were manifested through the line manager-employee relationship. Relations with colleagues was reported as strained when there were perceptions of disparity in workload, or where there was a sense that under-performing colleagues were not challenged. Both management and managed respondents suggested that pre-existing relationships, cliques, and a face-fitting culture was apparent (in Westville University). The relationship between programme leaders, who had responsibility for the constituent modules *but* no authority over those leading the module was reported as producing tension.

One of the trade union representatives interviewed suggested that the more performance orientated culture, and individualised reward systems apparently prevented collaborative working, due to concerns that individuals could eventually take credit or lay claim to another person's intellectual property. To balance this, other respondents suggested that they had no concern with relationships as their role was individual. Whilst this might have implications for collegiality, it did mean that relationships were not brought into conflict

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has identified three candidate themes, which have been informed by 16 sub-themes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2008) framework for thematic analysis has been a lengthy, complex, but ultimately rewarding process. It is emphasised that at the end of the process that the researcher should "clearly define what your themes are and what they are not" (Braun and Clarke, Ibid, p.92). Though carrying out this staged approach to analysis, I have re-visited and re-categorised a number of the themes within the data. This continuation of the iterative approach discussed previously, has resulted in the amalgamation, renaming and removal of some themes, and has provided a sense of clarity regarding the content, relationships and meanings within the data.

Having concluded these stages, I am happy to progress to the sixth and final stage of the data analysis - the production of a report (Braun and Clarke, 2008). The report will be provided within the following 'Findings' chapter, which illuminates and critically evaluates the stories which have been captured throughout the research.

## **CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS**

### **7.0 Introduction**

The previous two chapters explained the data collection method, and provided a detailed account of the data analysis process which was followed. The six stage model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2008) suggests that the final stage should comprise of a report detailing evidence of themes within the data. This chapter therefore addresses the key themes within the data.

Each section is introduced with a short paragraph detailing its coverage, and the themes are then presented accordingly, occasionally complimentary themes are discussed together. The first section describes a variety of topic which contribute to what I have termed 'the academic environment'.

### **7.1 The Academic Environment**

This section addresses the ways in which the environment within academic settings affects the management of performance. A number of sub-themes have contributed to the primary theme; these include a discussion of how organisational structures within the sector shape the environment, addresses notions of autonomy and collegiality, and finally, the extent to which HR are involved in issues around performance. Many of the factors discussed within this section explain the uniqueness of the sector, and describe the complexity of attempting to manage performance in the HE institutions.

#### **7.1.1 Structure** “...*there is no formal leadership structure beneath the head of school.*”

Whilst traditionally the HE sector has avoided notions of hierarchy and structure in favour of collegiality (section 7.1.2) and autonomy (section 7.1.3), this has been

challenged by the emergence of league tables and metrics such as the REF and TEF. Consequently senior management within HEIs have placed much greater emphasis on the measurement and robust management of performance. However, this is made difficult by the reporting lines within institutions which do not provide appraising managers with holistic views of the labour process, nor require them to consider areas outside of their direct area of responsibility. In this context, it is easy for poor performance to either go unnoticed, or be ignored:

*Interviewer: So given the matrix structure that you work in, how does that impact on your ability to carry out some of the performance activities, does that make life much more difficult, because there are so many different masters for so many different areas?*

*Respondent: Yes, it does, it does, yes. (...) I've got a bit of a bee in my bonnet about this one, and I constantly flag this up as a problem. And a consequence of this, is that people can slip through that hole. Under performance can be ignored or whatever. There's a gap. Professors is a very good example, it's still not clear who a professor's line manager is. Well, what's inside being in this role, different levels of managers, have done the PDRs for professors. But of course a professor also teaches, a professor can have other roles, non-research roles, and I'm an example of that, as an associate professor. We have, for example, the associate dean at the moment is doing a PDR for professors. He just focuses on their research. He has no interest on their teaching, their contributions to other academic duties. That's a significant gap. I have raised this with people lots of times, and we've discussed it. Ideally, what should happen is that whoever does that PDR should be communicating with myself, who's*

*responsible for that teaching etc., should be sharing things but that doesn't happen. I never see the PDR itself that's taken place. I never get any feedback from on that. I don't know what the individual's objectives are.*

(Academic Manager 11, Robbins).

Similar findings were reported elsewhere, and performance management of Professors (and associate professors at Mortown) was seen as particularly challenging due to the seniority and status they enjoyed in all three institutions. Culturally, this and other problems with organisational structures seemed to be tolerated, despite the recognition from both HR and management that rounded accounts could either not be gathered or acted upon effectively. The prevailing ambiguity surrounding performance and a tendency to ignore and or avoid poor performance therefore remained:

*"because of the strange structure that we work under, I've got people in my group who are more senior to me so, you know with people who are more junior than myself it is a fairly standardised line management responsibility. I do their PDRs, I do their probation, I manage all their workloads, I manage all the issues that come to me. However, for the people who are more senior than I am, I manage their workloads and do very little else".*

(Academic Manager 2, Westville)

*"What you can have in-- some of the things that I've come across is, a module leader for a program might be doing a prof who teaches on their programs. You can get technically grade 8 doing PDR for a prof. It's never going to work. They're never going to sit and say, "Hold on a minute,*

*Professor, you're not doing what you need to be doing." That conversation will never happen. It loses something."*

(HR Practitioner 1, Westville)

The issues depicted so far can be clearly identified in the conceptual framework on page 98. Issues around structure contribute to topics of ambiguity and authority, two of the pillars of performance management which I have identified. This is for two prominent reasons: issues around the availability of data, to determine holistic performance, and the extent to which line managers might seek evidence of performance that they themselves are not accountable for. For example, there appears to be potential for line managers more interested in, and accountable for research, to pay less attention to teaching performance of those they appraise. The issue of authority is also highlighted in the exchange with academic manager 2 and HR practitioner 1 on the previous page. Clearly, there is scope for inconsistency in the management of staff within matrix structure arrangements. Existing literature suggests that notions of hierarchy and management are viewed with scepticism within academic settings. Yet senior leaders in the case-study institutions appeared to increasingly seek more managerialist outcomes. This led some managers to believe that a greater sense of hierarchy, structure and process was required:

*"This goes against all my general views I suppose but I think that we need a little bit more structure in some way. So if you're going to have a PDR process then make it a proper PDR process and actually use it for something so actually they go, you know there's some transparency in the process in that actually you know there's some monitoring that these things are done properly so managers know they've got to do this stuff (...) if you're going to have a PDR process at least do it properly."*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville.)

In most (non-academic) organisational settings, managers are responsible for and usually have a line of sight to individual performance. Within academic structures, managed academics appear to have numerous individuals to whom they are responsible, for discreet aspects of their work, and therefore the full gamut of their performance is very difficult to capture:

*“the delegation of the line function means that the person who’s coming up during the annual reviews and whatever it is, objectives and performance appraisals and things with the department isn’t me, it’s the associate head who can specialise in ... there are pluses on that sort of matrix structure. But the problem then becomes accountability and management of an individual. The first thing (name redacted) said to me when I came here was no man can serve two masters. And now you’ve got to serve the associate head and your subject group leader”.*

(Academic Manager 1, Westville)

Whilst in the context of performance appraisal this has clear implications, not only for performance, but for learning and development; there are further potential issues around conflicting deadlines, workload, and fairness that the absence of a single manager might create.

None of the respondents in this research reported that the Universities takes substantive steps to facilitate discussion between different ‘managers’ to develop a comprehensive picture of an academic’s performance. There was some mention of email enquiries being sent to colleagues for comment on aspects of individual performance, but these were few and far between. One academic manager reported



that a member of their team had been set targets by the Faculty Dean that they, as the manager, had not been informed of. There are two problems with this, firstly, there is potential for the individual's performance against such targets to not be captured during the appraisal discussion, and secondly the line manager (and the appraisal process itself) is possibly undermined:

*“Respondent: Jeff, he's a program leader on a big program, the biggest program we have in the university. It didn't perform as well as it was hoped in the last NSS. He would've had discussions with (name redacted), who's our Dean and various NSS task force people and they will have set in targets. I will not have been informed of those targets. I could ignore that. If I was a more reluctant program leader, I could choose not to share that. You'd have to dig deep to sometimes find that information which—there is a gap there, which shouldn't exist”.*

(Academic Manager 11, Robbins)

The multifarious nature of academic work means that organisational structures within HE are complex. Clearly the environment within academia, and the attitude of managers can compound the difficulties that matrix structures present. However, structures alone should not be viewed as barriers to capturing a holistic view of employee performance. As the quote above clearly articulates, it is the *intent* of managers to share information in a transparent manner, in order to assist with the evidence gathering process that is often lacking. Consequently, performance discussions lack meaning with a danger that they fall into disrepute.

**7.1.2 Collegiality** *“There's pockets of collegiality that thrive, but I think it's definitely been a downward trend”*

Work in the HE sector has traditionally been seen as being characterised by a strong sense of collegiality. It was clear from the interviews that collegiality not only shaped the nature of performance management but also that it was itself being eroded by the growing emphasis on academic performance and efficiency.

Reports from Robbins University suggested that the desire to maintain collegiate relationships prevented the application of performance management processes, and that managers and colleagues were disinclined to mention performance issues:

*“And it does come down to that collegially. If we don't want to-- It's difficult to step on people's toes just to say you are a bit crap”.*

(Managed Academic 12, Robbins)

This was also the case at Westville. The following, rather lengthy quote clearly explains how collegiality can potentially lead to inaction with regard to performance concerns. The respondent describes how notions of collegiality collide with managerialist systems and the problems that this causes. In some respects tackling issues of performance appears to be approached far more cautiously in HE settings because of a concern for collegiality. This might mean that tolerance levels for under-performance are higher, and that performance that meanders around adequate to sub-par is left unchallenged:

*“You know we work in an open plan office, we sort of work together in a very collaborative way and therefore for me as a Manager to then make a judgement about a colleague and do something which is going to lead to negative consequences for them is a big, big step. (...) On the one hand we've got this sort of collegial approach and then we've got managerial systems in place. The clash of those is problematic, it is definitely. I think*

*as time goes on the dominance of the managerial systems is sort of becoming ever greater and the collegiality is sort of falling away, or the collegiality is changing. (...) I think those of us who actually take the hardest line on things like performance are probably amongst the most collegial people and it's partly because we feel like an individual is letting the rest of the team down that we are prepared to do it. So, I think if it was a question of the university if you like driving us to take action against members of staff I think we'd have real problems with that. I think that where action is taken it tends to be because there's a perception that other work load is being placed onto other staff because of an individual not doing the job properly".*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

However, this quote also illustrates the complex relationship between collegiality and performance management. For academic managers, the balance between trying to maintain collegiate relations, whilst managing performance issues is a challenging exercise. It is interesting to note that the larger impact of underperformance on others, and therefore potentially more widespread damage to a sense of cohesive working, was a motivator for taking action, as opposed to any sense of meaningful pressure from senior leaders to address such issues. In this sense, what might be seen as a managerialist approach to performance and collegiality could be argued to be entirely consistent.

In contrast, another manager in the same institution suggested that the climate of collegiality was potentially undermined by the presence of performance discussions, and highlighted the varying perceptions of staff who take part in appraisal processes:

*"I think it can have a very negative impact. I think there are mature, confident, high performing individuals, who see it as just part and parcel of*

*what we do. It may or may not have some consequences for them, but they'll get on with it and engage with it in a positive spirit anyway and then there are some for whom it can have really appalling impacts. If they don't get the right rating, or what they perceive to be the right rating, it can really damage their sense of their identity, their relationships with people. Collegiality because they believe that someone else has got the rating they should have had and so on. (...) I would say completely counter to collegiality and absolutely damaging to collegiality".*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville).

At Westville, it is interesting to note that ratings are part of the performance appraisal system, despite the range of critiques about such practices. The damage that such a system can have is clearly explained in the quote above and the way in which individuals might feel in competition against one another is problematic for managers whom might wish to work in a more collegiate manner. Within Robbins 360 degree appraisals are used for professorial staff. While this was a rare example of an attempt to make a more rounded appraisal of performance, it meant that perceptions of colleagues were shared which would otherwise have remained veiled:

*"I'd say the 360 upset me a bit because I thought my peers thought more of me. They didn't give me bad scores, but relatively, to the other scores I got from people externally and people that, I suppose subordinates is the only way to describe, although I don't think of them like that".*

(Managed Academic 13, Robbins)

Whilst such processes do not necessarily damage relationships, the requirement for staff to make judgements about colleagues was something that most respondents viewed as challenging.

Intriguingly, there was a shared perception at Westville, that unconsciously, the institution facilitated the erosion of collegiality through promotion mechanisms. As increasingly, the focus of some institutions (Westville being a good example) appears to be on research and publications, the perception was that academics who pursued individual goals were often rewarded with promotion:

*“We’ve had colleagues that don’t share equally and those that don’t (...) refused to do these jobs because they were doing research and then would go to head school, dean and moan when it was their turn to do it. They end up doing well. They haven’t done their fair share of the burden in any way, shape or form. They’ve been absolutely ruthless in pursuing their selfish goals to be successful.”*

(Academic Manager 5, Westville).

The following respondent from Mortown suggested that a greater emphasis on research activity affected notions of collegiality, as newly recruited staff were perceived to be less involved in day-to-day teaching and management, and were less present:

*“There’s pockets of collegiality that thrive, but I think it’s definitely been a downward trend also. So you’ve got pockets of people within subject areas, but it used to be more about networking between and I think they’re with different roles as well being introduced, associate professors that have come in and then they’re gone for long periods of the year. And I think people are looking around*

*and thinking well, how does that happen? And then they're not keen to teach and then other staff have to potentially pick up areas. So I don't think collegiality has been helped".*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)

Across the sample, managed academics reported that they had been conditioned to be more selfish and that successes had been increasingly individualised in nature:

*"it's the individualism that is recognised [yes] and that's through research publications and whatever. That's about the success of the individual. I don't think enough is placed on the success of the group or the school or whatever".*

(Managed Academic 1, Westville)

Clearly, the maintenance of collegiate relationships requires staff with shared values and the necessary skills, flexibility and desire to maintain such a climate. The marriage of collegiality and an increasingly target orientated, more managerial approach seems problematic and there was a general sense that collegiality had been eroded to varying degrees. The rate of change within the sector has led to an almost paradoxical environment as manager 3 from Westville explained:

*"I think it's partly because of this sort of tension between collegiality and, and managerialism and that the university likes the idea of collegiality but at the same time it wants the outcomes from managerialism and the two, the two are very difficult to fit together (...) the current VC who wants to get back to a very sort of old university collegial model of sort of people being in place for a couple of years and then moving on. That's great I think if you don't have a managerial targets and managerial processes".*

(Academic Manage 3, Westville)

Importantly, it was argued that achieving a balance between collegiality and effective performance required a sophisticated set of soft skills, something that, as this research has also found, many managers do not possess:

*"I think when it works it works beautifully. I think when it doesn't then you get a lot of bruised egos and people looking at resources given to one person and getting unhappy about it. So I think it takes a lot of will to keep the machine running and you need people who are calm, and tactful, and diplomatic and lots of soft skills to manage that".*

(Managed Academic 11, Robbins)

There is evidence that the direction of travel within the contemporary academic environment is toward a more managerial approach and that this might impact on the strength and continuation of collegiate relationships. Increased competition, both externally between universities, and internally between colleagues for scarcer resources, and promotion and development opportunities means that maintaining collegial relationships is potentially problematic.

*Interviewer: "Do you feel talking on that subject that higher education is recognized as a very much collegial environment, is that your experience of working in higher education?"*

*Respondent: "No, I think it's the opposite, there's a lot of individuals out here who are all fighting in their own corners, I've seen lots of examples of people "another paper, another paper", all they're trying to do is you know "I did 50 papers this year, and I did this, I did that. I've managed to bring in 25 thousand pounds into the ref". There's a lot of competition within the*

*University and I'm really pleased that I don't have to engage with that, I'm not going to engage with it."*

(Manager Academic, 7, Westville)

**7.1.3 Autonomy** *"...we have less autonomy now but I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing".*

Academic autonomy was almost universally cherished by respondents. Academic managers reported that they had little opportunity to reward staff with many tangible incentives and as such tried to give as much freedom as possible, particularly for those staff who were viewed as performing well. When managers had reason to believe that performance standards were not met, they attempted to apply greater control. This was described well by a manager at Mortown:

*"...to be very honest to track back on previous question you asked, maybe that is possibly where I do get some discretion. Where staff are often grafting I can't reward them in any other way than flexibility - there you go, all I ask people to do is let me know what you are up to and where you are going so I can see--*

*Interviewer: So you're managing quite a high trust kind of relationship with your staff then.*

*Interviewee: I like to. Where you're on the kind of other spectrum in that that can become tightened, but I'd rather not sledgehammer a nut and tighten up wherever required rather than have one system to take away privileges from all"*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)



Whilst there was a sense that autonomy had been curtailed, this wasn't always viewed as negatively by respondents as some commentators would argue it might be. A number of respondents suggested that they felt autonomy had gone too far and that clear policies and practices were required to ensure that some sort of standard and consistency was maintained:

*"I think we have less autonomy now but I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. I think there was a period of time where we had, staff had so much autonomy that they would literally go off and do exactly what they wanted and it's like well actually you need to, it would be useful to follow some processes to make sure ... it is all very well when everything is going fine but if you hit a snag and you have been doing entirely your own thing, or if you leave and you've been doing entirely your own thing it is a massive problem for everybody else. So I think having some structures in place and those structures have been developed more over the last few years ... that has been, I think, probably quite useful."*

Academic Manager 2, Westville University.

Some managers explained that they felt the historic conception of autonomy had allowed staff to "swing the lead" and to take umbrage when issues of performance were addressed. Clearly, academic autonomy is something that is valued in the sector, and indeed attracts and arguably retains staff within higher education. There was evidence however that managed academics wanted to preserve their own autonomy but also felt that others should be more closely managed, due to perceptions that their colleagues performance was below par. This is explained clearly in this exchange with a Head of School:

*Interviewer: "How do you think staff would react if there was greater scrutiny on performance?"*

*Respondent: Very badly.*

*Interviewer: Do you think so? That would be my gut feeling, but when I've spoken to people that perform well--*

*Respondent: Of course, they want the other ones pulled up."*

*(Academic Manager 9, Westville)*

Managed academics reported a sense that autonomy, or rather a misguided perception of autonomy, meant that some staff might spend much of their time working away from the University, particularly during non-teaching time, and highlighted the burden this placed on staff who were present. This in turn could lead to bad feeling and perceptions of inequity.

*"We've had a real problem and slightly off-topic, but we had a real problem with people disappearing for summers at a time. Leaving in June and then not reappearing until probably September. Although they say, "Well, I'm flexible. I can work from home but there's stuff that has to happen here and no one else is available. The people are here like me and other members of staff have to take on that responsibility. Things like dissertation supervision, "Oh well, I can Skype", but students don't like to Skype. They want to be in a room with you. They want to show you work. They want to show you texts and things they've read and they can't do that effectively on Skype. So, people that are here end up taking on more dissertation responsibilities."*

*(Managed Academic 12, Robbins University)*

Clearly, there is an opportunity within such a high trust setting that some employees will be more diligent than others, which perhaps relates back to the need to have certain minimum standards, policies or procedures, which provide some kind of framework for staff to work within.

The idea of autonomy and perhaps the absence of formal HR processes can also cause problems when managers attempt to address poor performance. Some academics appeared to almost resent questions around work performance, and perhaps have struggled to adapt to the changing environment within the sector. This was highlighted clearly by an HR advisor, who reported the following:

*“Absolutely, there have been a couple of cases where academic members, staff aren’t performing. They’re not even turning up, they’re not even here. But when that’s tackled, it’s that, “They’re bullying me.”, “I’ve been doing my research.”, “I have been doing...”. Some academics don’t expect to ever be asked what they are doing, where they are. They are just free spirits, come and go as they want to the point where some haven’t even turned up for lectures. I think some of that autonomy has gone way too far to the fact where, “Come on, you are earning 40 grand plus a year. The expectation is that you are here within the office. I’ve had some managers say they haven’t seen so and so for three weeks. But also from a manager’s point of view, it’s okay to ask. They could’ve been run over.”*

(HR Practitioner 2, Westville University)

Whilst this quote directly addresses autonomy, it is perhaps an example of the way in which autonomy and high levels of trust can be abused. Clearly, there should be an expectation that autonomy is married with responsibility. Perhaps as a consequence

of the abuse of autonomy or perceptions around colleagues professionalism (or lack of), a number of respondents described some changes in processes to provide greater parity in workload allocations, as well as additional clarity in terms of the management of performance. Importantly, the vast majority of respondents spoke of this in positive terms, despite the fact that arguably this reduced their autonomy.

*“Certainly, four or five years ago, the module was a little bit looser and we were floundering, but it was three different streams, people were doing different things and when your told, right you either get your shit together or else we'll cease to exist. We then said we need to have a leader, we got one of the guys to be the associate head, who's quite hot on stats and data and he said you know let's look at our time.*

*We made a conscious effort to deal with that, three or four years ago, that seems to have led to an easier working environment. Because we've sorted out the hours, we're all doing equal hours, we've sorted our responsibilities we'd be given, areas in which we work in, and we engaged with the PDP, so it seems to be something which has worked quite well.”*

(Managed Academic 7, Westville)

As this quote suggests change was often driven by the increasingly competitive environment that academics were working in. The research found that this had led to an acceptance that a reduction of autonomy was an inevitable price to be paid for greater job security. Furthermore, a greater emphasis on process and consistency reduced the ambiguity at the heart of the academic labour process:

*“Respondent: there’s so much ambiguity and lack of transparency. It’s better to have no management at all than to have this management we’ve got.*

*Interviewer: Yes. So, in actual fact you would welcome extra management as long as it was done properly and fairly?*

*Respondent: Fairly and properly, yes.”*

(Managed Academic 9, Westville)

However, interviews with trade union representatives painted a more concerning picture. Reports of increased scrutiny and surveillance were argued to lead to a perception of reduction in trust:

*“I’ve discussed this a lot with lots of different colleagues. And generally, there is a feeling that the pendulum swung so much the other way and that academic staff are required to complete this form for that activity and this form for something else. That everything then is potentially subject to that kind of management (...) I think there’s a feeling that that increasingly bureaucratised system does have the potential for a very narrow view of the academic roles, so that you’re then judged against, have you taught to that validated document or? (...) I think that’s where a lot of my colleagues, I think, feel that it reflects or it suggests a lack of trust in academic staff.”*

(Trade Union Representative 1, Westville University.)

Despite this view, the representative argued that, whilst there is pressure to adhere to “bureaucratic processes” many academics still manage to retain a sense of autonomy over what they deliver in the classroom and lecture theatre.

In summary it appears that elements of autonomy within the labour process have reduced, and there was evidence that the direction of travel appeared to be moving, albeit gradually, to a more managerialist approach. However, most staff in the sample appeared to generally recognise the rationale for elements of more prescriptive processes, albeit reluctantly. Indeed, there was an element that some of these processes were seen as tick box exercises, yet others were recognised as having value. Moreover, it was argued that in relation to the essential elements of teaching and research, autonomy does not appear to have been compromised unduly, despite the increasing language of performance.

**7.1.4 The role of HR** *“I sometimes get the impression that many staff in HR do not understand academic work...”*

The role of HR was considered as fundamental to wider issues around the academic environment, as a number of policies, processes and organisational strategies are either conceived or facilitated by the HR department. A clear example can be seen in the design and implementation of performance management constructs and the extent to which these are tailored to the HE context, and recognise issues of autonomy, collegiality and the opaque nature of numerous aspects of the academic labour process.

Perceptions around the role and involvement of HR were somewhat mixed, particularly at Westville, where HR practitioners were interviewed directly. However, as this section will evidence, a number of the comments made in relation to Westville were shared elsewhere. A compelling example, which underpins notions of value surrounding the performance management system, was the extent to which HR

captured meaningful information from appraisal discussions, which might inform organisational strategy, for example around training and development.

The main role played by HR in performance management was as author of the process or system. While the views of senior managers were influential, it was HR that was responsible for the development of strategy in this area. Beyond that, HR had three main roles: supervising the implementation of the performance management system; reviewing outcomes and feeding into wider strategy processes; and in advising and guiding managers in addressing poor performance.

At Westville, a crucial part of HRs role was facilitating “set up” and “close down” meetings. Objectives were agreed with senior managers in each School at the set up meeting, and key outcomes from PDRs were discussed, reviewed and evaluated at the close down meeting. These were described as important as a means of achieving some kind of consistency in individual objectives, to ensure that they were meaningful and contributed to University strategy:

*“In terms of what HR gets back is that they purely get the rating, that’s recorded on the HR record system for individual. However, because there is the set-up meeting and the close-down...The close-down meetings are for the head of school, dean, or directors, whoever’s running that meeting to ask, “So what do we hear from our PDRs? What sort of things, what messages were we getting from people? What we’ve learnt from the process that we can hear.”*

(HR Practitioner 1, Westville)

Furthermore, it was suggested that future close-down meetings would also be used as an opportunity to challenge inflated ratings that were not representative of wider performance. This was articulated clearly by the same representative:

*“I think there’s going to be perhaps more challenge, going back to deans and directors from the senior team, is to go back to an area and say in your area, you’re performing really badly, this school’s really struggling through the student numbers, the feedbacks not good on your module feedback, your NSS score’s not good and yet all your staff are meeting expectations, is that really right? Really?”*

(HR Practitioner 1, Westville University)

Despite this assertion, more than one manager at Westville reported that close-down meetings did not occur and argued that “all HR are interested in is the number, the rating” (Academic Manager 2). Indeed there was a sense in part at least that HR were not interested in the qualitative aspects of the PDR, which simply compounded the sense that the PDR was a tick box exercise. The difference in opinion between managerial and HR respondents was notable as a continuous thread during discussions, with HR suggesting that a “sharpening” of existing performance management tools would be happening and that greater use of data to support the management of performance would be utilised. Whilst this might reduce some of the problems related to the ambiguous elements of academic performance, the message from HR seemed to reinforce an intention to develop a far more managerialist ethos at Westville.

Furthermore, and counter to a number of reports from managers at Robbins and Mortown, HR respondents claimed that a suite of training was being developed so that



managers *did* have the skills to manage performance effectively. However, at the time of the research most academic managers interviewed suggested that they received little or no training, particularly in relation to soft skills and challenging conversations. Interestingly one HR representative at Westville argued that the barrier to effective performance management was not a lack of skill but an absence of a clear lead from the organisation that poor performance would not be tolerated:

*"In the past, in my time here, we've done blanket leadership development stuff and it gives people all the tools to be able to tackle all these situations. We've done actor-led role play type of things, assessments and quite often people have leaf courses like that will all the skills to do stuff (...) I think the skills are there, the desire to do it is less so, and if the process that you have allows you to back away from it and not do it, I think 9 times out of 10 people will do that. I don't think it's a lack of skills, it's a lack of confidence and the lack of perhaps organizational confidence in that we're going to, as an organization say, "This isn't acceptable and we're going to tackle this," as opposed to "If we turn a blind eye, just get on it. It doesn't really affect what we do."*

(HR Practitioner 1, Westville)

Whilst there was some recognition that the organisation had to become stronger at addressing issues and developing managerial confidence, the response in relation to skills was intriguing. Managerial skill will inevitably be mixed if managers are appointed to such positions without evidencing people management skills or experience.

Interestingly, a manager at Robbins reported that managers were offered limited support in dealing with poorly performing staff, which potentially points to further assumptions that managers should have the skills to manage. Furthermore, they saw both HR and the University as being risk averse and:

*“The university is risk averse. I suspect all universities are like this. When it comes to handling unsatisfactory performance. Of course, quite rightly, you've got to be fair, you've got to provide evidence. You've got to tick all the boxes. I know all that. It's very, very constraining, and it becomes a very lengthy process. It is very, very difficult to manage poor performance because of that (...) There is support (from HR), yes. But it's just not as good as I would hope. It's very much quoting by the book. Quoting from policies and procedures. A lack of understanding about what it's like to actually manage people in the workplace, in an environment where people's underperformance is very visible to students (...) and can be quite damaging...”*

(Academic Manager 11, Robbins)

It is important to note that this view was not universally shared and other management respondents suggested that HR were far too keen to enter into formal processes. This may reflect the different approaches adopted by individual HR practitioners, but it was notable that trade union representatives argued that when HR did intervene in disputes over performance their key objective was to protect the manager involved and the institution, which usually involved the employee exiting the organisation. They argued that attempts to find mutually agreed resolutions were limited citing a change in practice which correlated with an increase in performance management.

*“...They’re (HR) much less willingness to negotiate. Now, some people may say that’s absolutely, right, the rules should be adhered to and there shouldn’t be blurring over the edges. But actually, my view is that employment practices often are a bit muddier than black and white and if there’s been a management shortcoming and an employee failing, come on let’s try and ...And I think that happened more in the past than it does now. And I think that has reflected what was introduced deliberately as a change in practice. And I think that’s just happened to coincide with the increased performance management.”*

(Trade Union Representative 2, Westville)

Overall, the general sense from managers was that issues were not addressed in a meaningful way, that support was lacking or not appropriate and that HR were not interested in the nature of discussions during PDR’s. Trade union representatives at Westville had some very strong views about the nature of the HR function, and pointed to a lack of understanding about the academic role:

*“I sometimes get the impression about many staff in HR do not understand academic work (...) And the idea that two different members of staff might teach in slightly different ways for example seems to be an issue in a way that it wouldn’t be to any of us.”*

(Trade Union Representative 1, Westville University)

The findings here very clearly align to the literature around the relationship between management and HR. The quotes above paint a picture of HR lamenting the failure of line managers to address difficult issues and of management criticising HR’s approach to dealing with poor performers. However, at Westville there some

sympathy was expressed toward the HR function, given the apparently low level of status they enjoyed. There was also a sense that there was some acceptance from HR that systems they introduced would not be followed correctly:

*“The idea is that HR brief everybody then the Dean does his PDRs, the heads of school do their PDRs, the discipline group leaders do their PDRs and then it all gets fed back up, and any issues get fed back up and there’s a wash up meeting with HR. Well HR have got a meeting and they know it’s not going to be done properly. They have this very sophisticated system which they know is not going to be done properly really. All the meetings take place out of sequence, there’s no issues for back-up at all and I wanted to have the wash-up meeting with HR the last time I did PDRs because there were a number of issues that came out of the things that I wanted to feed back. That meeting was never had. So we have this system that operates and it looks great on paper, but certainly where I work and have worked at very best lip service is paid to it.”*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

A wide range of opinion was expressed around the topic of HR involvement in performance. Indeed it is difficult to draw clear conclusions given the diversity of responses. What is apparent is that there seems to be insufficient account given to the complexity of performance management in academic settings and a lack of consistency in approach. Furthermore, managerial perceptions of the role of HR and those of HR on the role of managers seem diametrically opposed and this incongruence has clear implications for the management of performance.

#### **7.1.5 Summary**

This section has explored the complexity of the academic environment. It has highlighted how matrix structures blur lines of authority and accountability making rounded appraisals of performance difficult. Moreover while much cherished notions of collegiality and autonomy present significant challenges to managers, they are potentially eroded by attempts to address poor performance in a more robust way. Finally, the role played by HR is complex and contested, but ultimately reflects a lack of trust between academic managers and HR practitioners.

## **7.2 Management in HE**

This section addresses the way in which managers approach the management of academic performance. The data and my own commentary and observations present a range of themes that were drawn from the interview transcripts. These include: issues around the contested role of “line managers”; perceptions of senior manager support and interest in performance matters and; issues of managerial confidence, competence, training and selection. As the following section attests, these “conditions” lead to a sense that managers within the case-study institutions were largely reluctant to enact their managerial roles.

### **7.2.1 Recognition for Managers: *“You’re not my Line Manager, I don’t have a Line Manager, I’ve never had a Line Manager!”***

The role of academic managers, particularly first “line managers” was one which was contested, particularly in Westville University. In particular, subject leaders who generally were tasked with conducting PDRs for rank and file academic staff were far from assured about their own position as managers:

*Interviewer: “Is that role is very much a formal line manager position?”*

*Respondent: "I'm hesitating to say yes, but it is really yes. Because I know there is a disagreement in the university as to whether it's a true line manager role."*

(Academic Manager 11, Robbins University)

This hesitation, or lack of certainty regarding how their nuanced managerial position was perceived, had clear implications for performance management. Furthermore, the perception above was shared by other respondents from Westville:

*"Yes, some of the older people in the group, people who have been, not older people but people who have been there for longer, I think probably would be less likely to obviously pick me as their line manager.*

*I am not saying they would pick anybody else, they would probably say I don't really have one."*

(Academic Manager 2, Westville University)

*"...the critical thing is that those employees don't see their managers as managers. So the first thing I was talking to you about before, I was one grade above them but they did not see me as a manager.*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville University)

Among managed academics there was more variety; some *did* identify their subject leader as their line manager, while others argued strongly that they were not. However, the lack of clarity and consistency is without doubt a factor which undermined and impacted upon performance discussions, and management in general.

One academic remarked that, whilst they recognised the need for systems and structure, that the academic role was almost akin to self-employment, such was the perceived distance between employee and manager. Other academics within the

same faculty and under the same type of structure varied in their opinion over who their manager was, with one citing the head of school and one even claiming that they had no line manager. This point is illustrated by the following example given by a subject leader who attempted to have a conversation about performance with a member of their group:

*“There is one long, very longstanding member of staff, who’s now retired, who when I said “We need to have an appointment to talk about performance appraisal, discussion, management”, whatever, she said “Oh well, I don’t see myself as needing that”. I said “Maybe you don’t, I’m required to say that I’ve undertaken it with you, as your Line Manager”, and she said “You’re not my Line Manager, I don’t have a Line Manager, I’ve never had a Line Manager”, and I think there was that ethos of Academics are these autonomous prima donnas that don’t need to be line managed, so how dare you try and impose something managerial on me.*

(Academic Manager 4 – Westville)

Clearly, identification of managers is problematic given the subjective responses reported. In fact identifying one individual within the matrix structures commonly found in academia was troublesome, as contrary to the prescriptive PM literature (and explained above in section 7.1.1), a single manager did not appear have a holistic view of performance, or indeed responsibility for the entire gamut of the academic role. This was clearly articulated by Managed Academic 11 from Westville:

*“I think it’s number of managers. I think because Constance was my direct line manager, but I also report to the Head of Research and the Associate Head of Subject so there’s a Research Group Leader and there’s a Program*

*Leader. I have two other bosses really. I do talk to the deans, so there's some sort of grandparent and child relationship there.*

*I feel that I've got a number of people that I'm answerable to. I have a one-to-one meeting with the dean coming up. I don't think she micromanages, but she really does have a hands on approach, she knows what's going on. She is approachable. She picks up on things. I feel that I can be really honest with her.”*

The variety of stakeholders involved within the academic labour process is arguably a factor in managerial and employee confusion over the question of “who is the manager” and such ambiguity has clear implications for the management of workload, performance and employee well-being.

### **7.2.2 Responsibility, Authority and Structure “...you have all the responsibility and no authority”**

The opaque nature of managerial positions was problematic, particularly at Westville and Robbins. Several line managers (subject group leaders) reported that they are charged with responsibility for performance, but consider themselves to lack the authority to address issues:

*“I think the job of the Discipline Group Leader, is an absolutely poison chalice, because they have the delegated responsibility for performance management, performance appraisals but don't really have enough authority or power to be able to do what's needed. So they are required to deliver the process and deliver happy people at the end of it, but they don't have any power to insist on things, to change things, to make things happen*



*and there is always that fear for the DGL that they will be hung out to dry if they do try and raise any performance issues.”*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville University)

This had clear implications for the management style that could be utilised when addressing issues, which tended to emphasise persuasion and negotiation rather than command and control. These softer managerial approaches would appear to be more in keeping with the cherished ideals of collegiality, however, they were difficult to sustain in the context of an HE sector that appears to have adopted a more market-driven and target orientated ethos. This closely relates to a hybrid approach of collegiality and managerialism. This was illustrated by one respondent with previous experience of managing in the private sector:

*“In previous lives, I could have just said, “This is the way it is. Take this crew here, put that crew there. Get this person on an airplane, and just make it happen.” I can’t do that. I can be firm, but a lot of it’s by negotiation and helping them understand. In some ways, it’s probably a softer touch, but it’s inefficient, particularly when you’re busy.”*

(Academic Manager 5, Westville)

This respondent appeared to be keen to proactively manage issues, and found the lack of authority impeded his ability to successfully manage his team. Others seemed more reluctant to address issues, as they were keenly aware of the rather tenuous position they held as the manager:

*“I’ve always been taught to pick your battles. I won’t tackle something that I have had no hope of ever trying to achieve anything with it. There is a little*

*bit of sort of defeatism that comes in, you think, "What's the point? I can't do anything about that".*

(Academic Manager 8 – Westville University)

The size of the institution had implications for people management within Mortown. As the smallest case study institution, the span of control for managers was narrower, and as such, issues around performance and workload allocation could be handled with greater clarity. Furthermore these issues were tackled by somebody with the authority to do so. For Westville and Robbins the scale of the operations mean that reporting structures were awkward and compromised the ability of those charged with appraisal responsibility to do so in a meaningful way. The following statement from a Head of School suggested that often the policy and procedure, and even outcomes provided to HR, did not necessarily reflect the reality of discussions. They also articulated the way in which appraisal responsibility was cascaded:

*"The people who have management responsibilities in my school are at the associate head levels and they'll be managing a pool of staff. There's too many of them. There's too many staff for the performance management to be done through those individuals. So if you take the PDR - the PDR process is farmed out to other senior colleagues and those senior colleagues typically don't have...They're not responsible for performance management, so they're, I think they see that role as encouragement and direction but not really grading people and saying you've got to pull your socks up or only they do. Only in a very gentle encouraging way, so I think the process and the paperwork says one thing but the practice is actually not like that at all."*

(Academic Manager 9, Westville)

A longstanding trade union official from Westville was able to trace back some of the structural issues which had implications for managerial responsibility and authority:

*“The decision to go for larger schools, I don’t think at any point in the 12-year history or whatever it is now that we’ve had those, has really been thought through as to how the line management span of the Head of School can effectively be delivered. And then there’s the discipline groups or subject groups find a kind of way to try and solve that. I think, a way to try and solve that problem which hasn’t really been worked through.”*

(Trade Union Representative 1, Westville)

HR respondent 1 from Westville agreed that the existing structure was undermining the organisations efforts to develop a more performance orientated approach within the institution:

*“One academic member of staff said to me, “The structure is the single point of failure in the process at the moment for them-- ” which I thought was quite powerful. Because you can have the best process in the world but if the right person isn’t doing the PDR, doesn’t have the accountability, it’s not going to be worth anything.”*

(HR Practitioner 1, Westville)

There appears to be universal agreement that a lack of managerial authority has a detrimental effect on efforts to manage performance. For managers keen to embrace their managerial role this is a source of frustration, for those who are more reluctant, the lack of authority provides a justification for avoiding issues. What also appears clear is that structures which have evolved over time do not appear to have yet been rationalised to reflect the contemporary HE landscape.

### **7.2.3 The Role of Status** *“I’m a prof and he respects that and he can’t really touch me”*

Managerial authority is further confused by issues of organisational status. The academic environment appears unique as managerial positions can be trumped by the rank and status of those being appraised in comparison to their appraiser:

*“So I was reviewing Professors when I was a Reader, and that makes it incredibly difficult to challenge someone on performance because you have responsibility for doing the PDR, you have responsibility for managing performance, but you have no authority over that individual.”*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

The management of professorial staff who enjoy high levels of organisational status is clearly problematic. One academic manager felt that some Professors used their status to levy their position to a point where they were almost untouchable. The management of professorial staff was seen as a difficult issue within both Robbins and Westville. At Westville conversations with a respondent from the HR department revealed that they were aware that academic status could hamper the organisation’s efforts to manage performance:

*“You can get technically get a grade 8 doing a PDR for a Prof. It’s never going to work. They’re never going to sit and say, “Hold on a minute, Professor, you’re not doing what you need to be doing.” That conversation will never happen. It loses something.”*

(HR Practitioner 1)

At Mortown attempts have been made to overcome this by ensuring that Professors are managed by the Dean. Therefore, the Head of Department (an Associate

Professor) appraises the remainder of the group, over whom he has both sufficient status and authority over, to make decisions. However, this too is problematic, as the interviewer described his “frustration” at having to discuss matters with the Dean before making decisions and described the somewhat “messy” issues around workload deployment.

Traditional, hierarchical organisations within the private and public sector would be unlikely to encounter such issues, as hierarchical positions tend to reinforce notions of authority and status. However, the status laden academic environment appears to undermine managerial legitimacy and efforts to manage performance. The status of Professors also has wider implications beyond the line manager-employee relationship. The matrix structure commonly in place in HE provides those with responsibility for discrete areas of work little authority to address issues. They have responsibility for areas of work (for example teaching) but perhaps not the authority or status to address concerns. In fact one Professor, who considered themselves to be performing remarked:

*“I’m a Prof and he respects that and he can’t really touch me. Do you know what I mean, Because I’m senior enough to say-- He might go to Lucy, and get Lucy to do something and this really needs to be done for the program, whereas with me, he’s a bit more careful (...) I think that has to do with seniority and there’s a mutual respect there I think because he has an associate head role”.*

(Managed Academic 13, Robbins University)

Whilst the evidence presented here refers to status of professors, such issues are not limited to those positions only. It appears status is potentially applicable in any

scenario where one party is perceived to hold a higher academic “rank” over another. The following section explains the important role that senior leaders have within this challenging environment.

**7.2.4 Senior Managers** *“it will be unlikely that you would get a great deal of support from your senior manager”*

Given the aforementioned issues around managerial recognition, legitimacy, and authority, the role of senior managers within the management of performance would appear to be critical. Theoretically at least, those with senior management positions should not encounter a number of the problems outlined above as they have both tangible authority, and usually hold professorial positions, providing sufficient organisational status. Senior managers therefore have the opportunity to support managers within their School or Faculty in addressing poor performance. Indeed, in all three organisations, if formal disciplinary or capability processes are triggered, they are overseen by senior managers, typically Heads of School.

However, evidence from Robbins and Westville suggests that senior managers often shy away from addressing performance concerns, leaving line managers exposed and staff within departments frustrated at perceptions of inaction and subsequent unfairness:

*“There is certainly a concern I think where I work that if you did do that, if you used the formal process to manage someone performance, whether through the PDR or not then it will be unlikely that you would get a great deal of support from your senior manager so therefore you tend not to”.*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

Senior managers at Westville, in one Faculty in particular, took no interest in staff appraisal systems, and did not seek feedback into qualitative aspects of academic performance. This appeared to contribute to a shared sense between line managers and staff that the appraisal lacked any real meaning:

*"I can remember having one in one other job that I've ever done and I've had two in the 12 years that I've been here. So I am not that much of it, I don't push to have them because I don't really see the value".*

(Academic Manager 2, Westville)

*"I see it so much as a farce that If you were to ask me what rating I've been given the last few years, I tell you I don't know because I don't even look at it. Whether it's excellent or Satisfactory or anything else I don't even know".*

(Managed Academic 9, Westville)

Line managers at Westville seemed largely accepting (albeit frustrated) of the status quo, and perhaps surprisingly given the contemporary academic environment, did not feel under pressure from senior leaders to manage performance. However, the apparent hands-off approach was problematic when issues did present themselves, and meaningful action and support was required from senior management:

*Interviewer: "What support if any, did you get from senior Managers in that?"*

*Respondent: None whatsoever, I discussed it with Head of School at the time, who said "Oh that's typical of them", that was it. I also mentioned it to another Head of School, who knew this person very well and said "Oh that's just ridiculous" and that was it. So the support I had was from a couple of colleagues.*

*Interviewer: And how did that leave you feeling?*

*Respondent: Exposed, very, very, very exposed and I think that is the problem with performance management in our context, that if there are performance issues that are raised, there is a feeling and I know there's lots of apocryphal stories about how the moment that it comes to the crunch, you'll find those around you and above you backing away and you will be the one that's hung out to dry, as the Manager that's tackled the issue".*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

Respondents from Robbins also suggested that senior managers tended to be reluctant to provide strong support when Managers attempted to escalate performance concerns:

*"In terms of other support. My manager at the time wasn't particularly supportive. He was probably less experienced than me and didn't know how to handle it either. I don't feel that there is a huge amount of support there."*

(Academic Manager 11, Robbins)

In contrast, at Mortown, there was evidence that some senior managers were more engaged with management of performance and were keen to learn from the outcomes of the appraisal process:

*I have been a Head of the Department now for five years with two different Deans. Certainly my predecessor definitely did (take an interest). They, at one point were interested in some of the notes the members of staff members have written. And so there was a follow up discussion which I didn't necessarily expect. I thought it's going to be more of light touch sign off.*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)



Furthermore, there was a sense that support would be available in the event of line managers needing to address issues. It is worth remembering that in this institution, there were clearer reporting lines, and a general sense of clarity around managerial positions and authority.

Nonetheless, there was a lack of consistency across all three case-study institutions. It was notable that HR practitioners emphasised the importance of Heads of School and Faculty Deans playing a lead role in adopting a more systematic approach to the management of performance:

*"I think one of the things as well is we need to have more accountability at senior level for what's going on in an area. So when all the PDRs are done, ratings are allocated for heads of school for directors of the service to actually go back and talk to their managers and say, "right, let's have a look at what your ratings are...so it's a meaningful exercise."*

(HR Practitioner 1, Westville)

One explanation for this lack of consistency and the reluctance to tackle poor performance is the temporary nature of many senior management positions, whereby Heads of Department and Schools often held posts for a fixed-term. Therefore they were often conscious that, in time, they would be returning to the 'rank and file'. One managed academic explained this as follows:

*"There's been problems we've had that have gone up to Head of School and it's all just brushed aside because that person knows that in the future there's going to be, that person's going to be their colleague, so no-one wants to upset anyone else ..."*

(Managed Academic 5, Westville)

The potential for rotation of Heads of School who then return to substantive academic posts is something quite unique to the sector, and this issue, compounded by the risk averse nature of two of the university settings examined, perhaps in part explains some of the reticence around senior management involvement in performance issues.

#### **7.2.5 Managerial Selection and Training** *“you certainly don’t get any training in relation to the management of people”*

Ambiguity in relation to managerial authority and, at best, varied support from senior managers presents challenging context for those with line responsibility. This is compounded by the way that managers are recruited, and once in post, the level of training that they receive. These issues will be addressed in the sections that follow, which will explore their impact on perceptions of managerial competence and confidence.

The pathway to managerial positions within academia is multiple. Whilst some managers interviewed during this research had some management experience, this did not appear to be at the forefront of selection criteria. There were fairly regular examples that suggested that academics found themselves in managerial roles simply because nobody else was willing to do it:

*“I think in terms of whether you get one of these posts, I think it tends to be whoever’s prepared to do it. So there’s very little consideration of whether somebody is the best person for that job (...) there’s no interview process for most of these, (...) very few people want to be a discipline group leader, very few people want to be an associate head and so, I know in some faculties and some departments there are interview processes and there’s competition (...) but there doesn’t seem to be in our faculty and even if there*

*are interviews, the interviews are entirely about... I was interviewed for Associate Head actually (...) and it was all about my research leadership and what I thought about research strategy. It wasn't anything about how would you deal with a difficult conversation with a poorly performing professor, which was the most difficult part of the job. So those issues are not taken into account when people are recruited".*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

Alternatively, managerial responsibility was a by-product of an academic promotion, based on criteria other than people management experience, skill or suitability. At Westville in particular, there was a clear sense that the management of people was almost an afterthought both for those making selection decisions, and at times, those whom assume people management responsibility:

*"Why do I do it? I took over, I was a Reader or something and it's a requirement if you are in a promoted post to contribute to school management so that was one thing I was doing."*

(Academic Manager 1, Westville)

Most management posts at Westville were not a result of a promotion, came with little in the way of compensation or time allowance, and in some cases were not recognised by the HR department as having managerial authority. Again, people management suitability or experience was often not considered, and there was a sense (from senior managers at least) that anyone would be able to do it:

*"So the key role for delivering performance management is the subject leader role, and it's not permanent, and you don't move up the hierarchy and you get two thousand pounds, and people are often tempted by being*

*told “It will stand you in good stead for promotion”. It won’t, it will be one piece of evidence, (...) but the other thing is, and this is something that’s quite peculiar to Westville, the reward, the tangible reward, is a pittance compared with what you can earn doing other things. (...) There are really terrible messages here about the role, the importance and the value.”*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

At Mortown and Robbins, there was some evidence of more robust approaches, and regard for people management. Respondents from Mortown suggested managerial skills were considered, and assessed at interviews before selecting individuals for leadership positions. Furthermore, there was a sense at both Mortown and Robbins that the skill set required for first-line manager positions was now being given more attention in recruitment and selection decision making:

*INT: “Do you know if much regard is given for people management competence or experience in that selection decision?”*

*RES: “Yes, there would be a focus on people management behaviours and competencies. But it wasn’t when I applied.”*

(Academic Manager 11, Robbins)

As outlined in the previous section, the selection of managers appears to be largely on the basis of criteria other than people management. Given that the majority of respondents suggested that their prior skills, knowledge and experience in this regard was not a primary concern, the issue of training takes on particular significance.

Whilst responses to questions around training were mixed, the majority of respondents reported that managerial training was largely process-based and was mandatory only for recruitment and selection, and performance appraisals. Soft skill development,

such as communication skills, or handling challenging conversations were not considered as mandatory, although managers could choose to go on such courses if they wished:

*“I know that other managers have been offered leadership courses here but nobody’s ever, and there are courses available, I know they’re available, but no one’s actually ever sort of said you know as part of you becoming a manager here’s an induction, here’s the process, nobody even tells you what the processes are. So you don’t even get that basic stuff, but you certainly don’t get any training in relation to the management of people, and managing difficult issues or you know, how do you have a conversation with a member of staff. I think that’s a big issue for academics because there’s a, you know some academics are great at talking to people but a lot of academics don’t have the best interpersonal social skills. They might be great researchers but they’re much happier sitting at a computer rather than actually talking to anybody”.*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

The absence of a structured approach to managerial training and development is perhaps unsurprising, given the aforementioned lack of value that seems to be placed on people management skills. However, the complex academic labour process and unique culture in academic settings, means that management in the sector is arguably more challenging than in more traditional environments. The literature review suggests that academics do not enjoy or seek training, and this view seemed to be reflected in this research. Arguably some might view the idea of training as somewhat demeaning, or a lower level activity:

*"I think you'll find few professors who said, "I want to undertake personnel type training in order to improve my role as an academic leader." I can't imagine...I'm going through the people in my head in this school, I can think of a couple that might see it as part of their role and embrace it as part of their role; slightly reluctantly, but see it as part of their job. But the majority would not be interested".*

(Academic Manager 6, Westville)

Respondents from Robbins reported similar organisational approaches to managerial development, with mandatory training focussing on appraisal, recruitment and equality and diversity only. Again, it was reported that coaching and soft skill development were offered, but these were voluntary and relied on the individual's self-awareness and motivation to improve as the driver for attendance. However, there was a suggestion that the University was beginning to increase its focus on improving managerial competences. When evidence of a more focussed approach to managerial development was apparent, this often relied on the input of specific senior leaders, who recognised the value of such training, and were keen on developing leadership and management potential. At Mortown, an academic manager benefitted from the enlightened views of a particular senior figure:

*"I had a supportive and proactive Dean at that time and they put me on a leadership training programme for small institutions."*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)

A similar report was captured from Westville, although this seemed to be the exception:

*“To be honest James, who's just about to retire, has stepped down from head of school. Very good manager, very keen on how we deal with people. He (...) invested a lot time in making sure that everybody that was operating that post operated in the right way. (...) I had 12 weeks of executive coaching which can be a great way to get all the 360s and all that sort of stuff in. A series of other training where you have different conversations and these sorts of things that he made sure that all the senior managers had done. That was good.”*

(Academic Manager 5, Westville)

The research found that senior leaders who focussed on training, also tended to place an emphasis on people management skills in their selection decisions. Whilst this was encouraging, it meant that those that perhaps needed the training the most, were the least likely to receive it. This was a point made clear by a managed academic:

*“I used to see it a lot when I worked at the NHS because you'd get really good nurses, for example, would become nurse managers or ward managers and they'd be rubbish because they were really good at nursing. And I think because you're a really good academic it doesn't make you a good manager (...) But there's no sort of support for them, there doesn't seem to be any training for them or any ... or they don't seem to be held account because if they were being held to account they'd want to help themselves.”*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville)

The absence of accountability in the management role arguably meant that managers weren't engaging in challenging conversations and therefore training on such matters

was potentially not required. Conversely, the absence of training might well have prevented managers from feeling competent in handling such conversations, and therefore they might avoid them.

#### **7.2.6 Competence and Confidence** *“I didn’t understand what the requirements and expectations were of me”*

The topic of managerial competence is a highly subjective one and responses from managers relied on their honesty and self-awareness. Therefore evidence from HR, trade union representatives and managed academics is used to triangulate the findings within this section.

At Westville, there was a general view that managers, particularly senior leaders, lacked the skills needed to manage people. This was compounded by their relationship with an HR function which was intent on supporting managerial discretion:

*“I think it’s pretty terrifying how little people management competence senior managers have and then that relates back to the HR model where we have sort of where HR are seen as being all powerful in some respects because senior managers don’t really know a great deal about HR issues. HR because they’re trying to be very strategic don’t really want to intervene so you have managers who really don’t know what they’re doing or don’t know what to. Then you have HR who want to give them much more autonomy to do things and that’s a bit of a recipe for disaster really.”*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

Furthermore, the assumptions that organisations make around people management during selection decisions and the lack of training has arguably more acute implications in the HE sector than in other settings. There were suggestions that “it’s



*by luck rather than judgement that you might have somebody who is subject group leader or a Manager who is actually any good at it.”* The chances of identifying good people managers in academic settings might be reduced by virtue of the skills needed to be a successful researcher:

*“An academic is not necessarily employed for their people skills. They’re employed for knowledge, experience, and stuff. And people that lock themselves away in darkened rooms to write books and papers and whatever, are not necessarily going to be the most people oriented in the first place.”*

(Managed Academic 1, Westville)

This view was also mirrored by trade union representatives at Westville:

*“They’re left to their own devices and I tell you something else that you know there’s a lot of lack of people skills, a lot of them are very self-centered and very obviously they have got there because they’ve got a lot of ambition. They want to be the best at the field but then they’re not going to try. They’re not the best person to nurture the others because they’re very involved in their own stuff....The lack of awareness about what is it to deal with a staff...That is sad to see that.”*

(Trade Union Rep 2, Westville)

Managers that did have previous management experience, and considered themselves competent when fulfilling their people management responsibilities in previous settings, admitted to being less confident when managing in HE. This was due to ambiguities over the extent of their authority and also the nature and scope of academic work:

*“Not confident at all, not that I didn’t think I could be a good Manager, because I’d done management quite a lot beforehand. But that I didn’t understand what the requirements and expectations were of me, in that particular role, and that there didn’t seem to be any transparency about what the institution wanted, about what the Head of School wanted, what the faculty wanted, nor about the processes I was required to engage in.”*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

Respondents felt that managers particularly lacked confidence to address performance issues at an early stage. While this is perhaps unsurprising, this meant that problems were often allowed to escalate until there was a need to engage in more formal processes. Unfortunately managers were no more confident when faced with implementing formal procedure, and the use of formal processes often resulted in negative reactions from staff including accusations of bullying, retaliatory grievances or absence. An HR respondent explained this as follows:

*“I feel that from the few cases that I have been involved in like this, managers lose their confidence to deal with it. They're too scared because of the repercussions. It's almost like people are now, and I have quite a few, where people who are about to be performance managed for some reason, they'll either use the grievance or they'll use health, and they'll go off with work related stress or thing like that. There is quite a pattern forming of that. That's why managers just lose confidence and they just think, we just have to almost deal with what we've got”.*

(HR Respondent 2, Westville)

This statement mirrored feedback from an academic manager who described a scenario where they attempted to address unauthorised absence with a member of their staff. However, the staff member had become extremely distressed and accused the manager of racism which meant that they would be less likely to tackle issues in future:

*“...this person cried, and subsequently complained about me to another member of staff, suggesting I was racist because I hadn’t acknowledged the fact that they were an international colleague, for whom circumstances were rather different. Our relationship has been permanently soured, because I feel really jumpy about the suggestion of me being racist, because I’d raised some performance issues”.*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

Clearly, in the face of such accusations, the potential stress and pressure, and also the time that is invested in retaliatory grievances, managers would be less likely to be confident in addressing performance issues. Without senior manager support and distanced relationships with HR, most managers were very reluctant to trigger formal processes.

#### **7.2.7 Data, Evidence and Performance Systems** *“...there was very little objective data or evidence that one could use to take any sort of formal action”*

Discussions with participants revealed a general consensus that there was insufficient information available to effectively measure *individual* performance. Whilst some data was available from sources such as NSS and module evaluations, such metrics usually reported shared performance from a number of academic staff. Managed academics explained that they often felt under little or no pressure to evidence

performance. This is perhaps unsurprising, due to the aforementioned reports from a number of managers that they did not feel under pressure to manage performance from more senior managers. Interestingly, there was wide agreement from academic managers that they faced challenges when attempting to individualise performance and this led to decisions being made on the basis of anecdotal evidence, perception and assumption rather than “hard data”. One academic manager explained:

*“There would be a lot of rumours about individual staff who were poor, or perceived to be poor or (...), there were rumours that students said they were poor, or there might be individual complaints about a module from a student rep, or an individual student. If that was contested by the member of staff there was very little objective data or evidence that one could use to take any sort of formal action.”*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

This apparent absence of data often made managers reluctant to actively address performance issues as this could not be substantiated. The result was often meaningless conversations, underpinned by a sense that HR and senior managers were only interested in the performance rating, and not the qualitative process, with the perception of the appraisal meeting effectively being considered a “tick box” exercise by many:

*“the reality is that I think we tick box here, and no one is interested in what development needs have been identified, what support issues have been raised, what role challenges people are experiencing. It’s, we’ve got to submit a return to HR on what ratings we’ve awarded and have the discussions been done.”*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

The absence of objective data was problematic for both academic managers and managed academic staff. Managed academics reported ambivalence to appraisal discussions and often felt there was little recognition for a job well done, as focus was often given to areas of performance that *could* be measured:

*"I think it's definitely driven by research output more so than ... the teaching is probably second, but all the other stuff that I'm supposed to be doing doesn't really feature. It's almost like yeah "well done for that", but let's spend 45 minutes talking about three star papers. And I'm not sure that's ... it's not the most rewarding experience, let's put it that way."*

(Managed Academic 1, Westville.)

A particularly challenging area to manage was considered to be teaching performance. Whilst information such as module evaluations were available, these often weren't scrutinised in detail or looked at consistently. Furthermore, the paper-based nature of the evaluations meant that staff could spoil feedback which was negative, if they so wished:

*"There are some indicators from teaching but it's actually very difficult to point to individual poor performance. I've been on the edges of gathering that information for a colleague. It's difficult because it's not kept systematically".*

(Academic Manager 6, Westville)

Managed academics also acknowledged the difficulties in identifying individual teaching performance, as often modules were taught within teaching units. This was

in stark contrast to assessing performance against research objectives, which were more easily individualised:

*"I think in terms of research, yes. I think as individual units, as research has been very measurable. It's very easy to look us up and say, "Julie bid for that she didn't get it. Julie bid for that she got 12K. Julie said she produced two, three star papers, she hasn't done that." It's very easy to do that, I think from the teaching side, it's much harder because you're in module teams. You've got measurements there. You've got student satisfaction in the module. You've got NSS on program level, but into that mix goes lots of modules and into modules go lots of teachers."*

(Managed Academic 11, Robbins)

There was huge variation in terms of managerial approaches to data and evidence. Some appeared to attempt to place the data into some kind of wider context, some relied on anecdotal evidence, and others adopted a harder approach without considering the root cause for, or wider factors influencing, poor performance. Furthermore, in the absence of sufficient information being available, managers had to make decisions at appraisal on the information that was provided by the person being appraised:

*Interviewer: "Do you think you have access to sufficient information to be able to make a judgment on somebody's performance?"*

*Respondent: "No, you can't. You have to rely on the data that they're collecting. There's only been once where I thought, at some point, right, I've tried to look it through"*

(Academic Manager 8, Westville)

The lack of consistency was viewed as problematic, and decisions were often subjective due to the lack of objective measurements. This could give rise to a sense of unfairness, conflict and bad feeling. However, some managed academics were largely ambivalent to the process, although that is not to say that they didn't perform their roles diligently. It was also suggested that relationships with key figures and face fitting was more important than performance against objective measures:

*"Well, where are they going to get the evidence from? The evidence is based on subjectivity. Is that the NSS, the SPQ or a student bringing some form of complaint? So, that's from a teaching role....there are no official targets set out so there's nothing to measure against... I'm all for that by the way and don't get me wrong, I'm not sitting here going 'let's have a rigid performance management' because that creates its own problems in itself as there's no flexibility....so it does feel very subjective and based on, as I said earlier on, whether your face fits... If you're in the in group you're okay, if you're in the out group, you could find it very difficult to maybe demonstrate that you are performing to the standard, because I don't think there's anything set down."*

(Managed Academic 2, Westville).

The suggestion of a face-fitting culture was acknowledged by other respondents. A reliance on anecdotal data meant that managers faced accusations of carrying out a "witch hunt" if they started looking for evidence of poor performance. Therefore, the absence of readily available, and transparent, objective measures provided fertile ground for conflict.

As a consequence some managers felt that more data and evidence was preferable:

*"My previous institution was far more managerial but I think it was actually better. People knew much more where they were. It wasn't perfect by any means but people knew where they were to a much greater extent. I think there was a greater degree of clarity about objectives and things like that. A lot of the issues that we've talked about the problems were still there don't get me wrong, but it was better than we had here".*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

Others were more resistant to such suggestions though:

*"I think we're lucky here. My partner's at a different university and seeing, yes, all the surveillance and monitoring that he has to go through, I don't think I could work in that."*

(Academic Manager 8, Westville)

Finally, as outlined above, the reporting lines within academic settings means that often the appraiser has limited knowledge of the full gamut of individual performance. The appraiser might for example have knowledge of teaching performance, but not of research. Or, as described below of research but no knowledge of teaching performance:

*Interviewer: "This is hypothetical completely, but let's say there was an issue with your teaching, Norman who does your appraisal would have no knowledge of that whatsoever."*

*Respondent: No knowledge of it, he wouldn't be interested.*

*Interviewer: No interest at all?*

*Respondent: No, no interest whatsoever.*



*Interviewer: This notion-- I think it's going back to the point you were making at the start, this notion of holistic performance appraisals, performance management--*

*Respondent: It does not exist. In my view, it doesn't exist in academia".*

(Managed Academic 13, Robbins)

Whilst the availability of data is clearly an issue which impedes managers from proactively tackling performance issues, there was a sense that this was only part of a wider problem. The lack of robust objectives and clear targets lead to a sense of apathy, and occasionally frustration for both managers and those being managed. There was little evidence from Westville or Robbins that appraisers sought information from other stakeholders to ensure a holistic account of performance was gathered. This had implications for monitoring the full academic labour process, and undermined the prescriptive performance literature and organisational policy and practice documents.

### **7.2.8 Summary**

This section has clearly illuminated the complex terrain of performance management within academic settings. The topic of management explained that those with managerial responsibility often did not feel they had the requisite authority to address performance issues. Furthermore, this was a perception that was frequently shared by managed academics whom cited the head of school as their manager, or in one case felt that they didn't have one at all. The issue of status was clearly problematic and meant that managers were often compromised in addressing concerns with staff that might enjoy a higher level of seniority. Some organisations attempted to take

account of this by ensuring that more junior staff did not carry out appraisals, but others allowed peers, or junior staff to attempt to carry out performance discussions.

Support from senior managers was largely found to be lacking, and furthermore there was often an absence of pressure from senior leaders to manage performance. This frequently meant that there was a shared reluctance to tackle performance problems. Managers were often not required to evidence people management knowledge or experience, and some did not receive any training for the role, although there were some positive examples in this regard. There was a positive relationship between conditions such as: robust recruitment and selection, support from senior leaders and managerial training and perceptions around managerial confidence and competence. Finally, there was widespread agreement that the data and evidence of individual performance was lacking. This ambiguity lead to a sense of apathy and occasional frustration, but also provided opportunity for conflict and dissatisfaction.

The findings in this section relate closely to challenges of performance management and appraisal illustrated through the conceptual framework (p.98). Issues around the recognition of line managers clearly contribute to perceptions around the legitimacy of their authority. The fact that in a number of cases, particularly at Westville, authority was contested had clear implications for the handling of performance discussions. The cocktail of a lack of authority, and a lack of senior management support inevitably meant that managers were reluctant to address performance issues. The framework explains how these factors might result in what I have termed in the framework as 'managerial reluctance'. Furthermore, the nuanced managerial role that appraisers found themselves in, primarily at Westville, meant that those who enjoyed higher levels of organisational status, might be able to levy this as a means of obstructing attempts

to manage their performance. This was particularly visible during accounts of appraisal of professors at Westville, and to some extent with associate professors at Mortown.

The literature has explained that power can be present with little regard for agency (from a Foucauldian perspective) and the conceptual framework reflects the potential for power to manifest itself in the form of organisational policy, procedure and surveillance. The presence of such systems should illuminate the work of individuals. However, the application of such systems was often infrequent, and did little to follow best practice performance management techniques such as regular feedback and ongoing conversations. The extent to which staff felt they were actually under surveillance was therefore questionable, and indeed the framework illudes to this, by questioning the extent to which staff and management feel that they are working in an environment of scrutiny. Whilst this would seem predictable, and indeed largely culturally appropriate in an academic setting with high regard for autonomy, it does mean that the labour process remains ambiguous. This combination of factors, both present in the framework, and in this findings section, clearly make effective performance management highly challenging.

### **7.3 Conflict**

This section will address a range of themes under the umbrella of conflict that were presented within the research. At the extreme, some of these topics could be framed as bullying, though these issues were very few in number. For the most part concerns were less serious and could be more accurately described as low level conflict, manifesting in issues such as frustration, dissatisfaction or disengagement. Clearly a

continuum exists when addressing the theme which has been labelled as conflict, and consequently a number of issues will be described within the following sub-sections.

### **7.3.1 Dissatisfaction** *“It’s sort of a fog of unfairness really...”*

A number of participants described a general fog of discontent, or dissatisfaction with the working environment in their institution. Some of these issues can be directly attributed to a number of areas addressed in the literature review, particularly around changes within the sector. In two of the institutions, changes affecting the sector had led to institutional responses and reviews of programmes at Faculty and School level. This had resulted in a reduction in academic staff. The impact of such activities was described by a manager from Mortown, who explained an element of survivor syndrome for those that remained, as well as additional responsibility to fill the void left by the departure of colleagues. The opportunity for such issues to impact upon performance are clear, given the added pressure, and concern in such a working environment:

*“But they’re battered and bruised particularly at this is the point in time but we’ve had organization change two years back and then just going through the next two years and another round of very, whereby we’ve lost academic staff in the department and afar on. So that yes, people have been looking over the shoulders thinking who is going to get the nod so there’s definitely uncertainty or has been uncertainty for stuff of being concerned about that and any conversation mostly just, “Keep calm, don’t feel able to keep doing what they’re doing.”*

*Often then it does affect performance or administration type performance mostly. You end up having to help chivvy people along and just help them*

*even though they're good members of staff. So you're having to kind of "don't forget this or that". Send apologies at a meeting where you know that they should be there and you know you kind of cover it and trying to support and afterwards its "why weren't you there?". But I understand why that's happening because I think sometimes they're stretched too thin if. There are stressed stuff, including myself. But I've seen a number of anecdotes of staff going off sick across the institution."*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown University)

A source of shared frustration amongst academic managers and managed academics surrounded staff that were perceived to not be performing particularly well. Managers cited a lack of measurable data and a subsequent reliance on anecdotal evidence to establish patterns of behaviour and performance. This left them feeling that they could do little to challenge behaviour which was closer to disengagement than poor performance:

*"I suppose someone who has never come up with a single module themselves, who's very happy teaching at modules they've inherited, and have taught them for 10 years, have never upset a student, never made a student happy either, but are tootling along just fine (...) There's nothing ever coming up, there's no ideas, no initiative, nothing, but they're doing everything that's been asked, right?*

*The team has to carry that because I can't-- There's no measure for that. [laughs] The students are all happy enough, [laughs] but actually, in order to move the school forward, I need drive and initiative, and there's only a*

*very limited number of people that have that. I wish there was some way of performance managing disengagement in some way.”*

(Academic Manager 9, Westville University)

The sense that staff were “getting away” with sub-standard performance caused significant amounts of dissatisfaction. Some managers felt they were limited as to what they could do, perhaps this again related to a lack of training and support, and a lack of willingness to have a difficult conversation. For managed academics frustration was particularly acute when staff were moved off a module, as a result of perceived poor performance, leaving staff who were considered as good performers with a higher workload. There was a sense that poor performance was rewarded with staff moved to positions where they could do less damage, instead of any managerial intervention being made. The following exchange captures this sense of dissatisfaction, and was repeated across the institutions within this research:

*“Interviewer: In terms of if colleagues are under performing or people are under performing do you get the sense that much is done in terms of proactively managing those issues?”*

*Respondent: No. Not enough, you get the classic curve. The most common ones that people are not performing on modules which is the lower threshold it's then that's just not acceptable. Often, it would be other staff not quite complaining I suppose about someone else on module and just want to not pulling their weight or student reactions to them on module, doesn't fit. More often than not the action is to take people out of the module and put them on to other things then you get people with more time because you're doing more dissertation, more-*

*Interviewer: They're rewarded for poorly performing?*

*Respondent: Yes."*

(Managed Academic 10, Mortown University)

The inability or unwillingness of managers to address and investigate performance concerns had huge implications for perceptions of fairness and general satisfaction. Whilst a lack of data can cause challenges for managers, it appeared that this was an excuse for not engaging in discussions with staff who they suspected as not performing sufficiently well. This inaction lead to a more widespread problem, articulated well by a manager from Westville:

*"I don't know how to describe it really. It's sort of like a fog of unfairness really. There's this general, there's this general dissatisfaction, undefined dissatisfaction about some people and this, and that's addressed in a very, very sort of unspecific way which is perceived by those individuals I think quite rightly to not be particularly fair. There's very, very little concrete and specific, there's very few ways in which problematic issues are addressed in a concrete specific, observable, transparent way.*

*I think there's a level of disengagement which, so it depends how you define conflict. If you define it very broadly in terms of you know is it discontent, then yes. Does that then manifest itself in disputes and grievances and people bringing out claims, no, very rarely (...) because people disengaged it's sort of like they won't raise something, or they're not going to resist something particularly. So they're just low level conflict in the forms of discontent, disengagement which managers just don't address, which*

*managers then avoid because actually if they start to address it, it means that you're opening a can of worms."*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

The impact of a lack of management appeared to have implications for individuals that were performing well. Respondents remarked on their perceptions of unfairness or aggravation at what they considered to be poor performance going unchecked, and that individuals were getting away with and even benefitting from, sub-par performance. It was for this reason, that a number of people interviewed actually wanted more robust management of performance, in the hope that this would mean that something more would be done regarding colleagues whom they perceived to be under-performing. Numerous accounts reported feelings of unfairness and resentment at apparent inaction, particularly when the performance of others affected student perceptions and measurements such as NSS:

*RES: "It's really frustrating, because it's frustrating and then you need to manage the programme and you continue to get the student complaints because it looks like you haven't done your job and it looks like you haven't managed that and that's frustrating. Because you think if it was my job I'd happily do it, I'd happily do it, if it wasn't my job, I had responsibility and backup but I don't."*

*INT: So you're scrutinised against something that you've got no control over and not only have you got no control over it, your immediate manager hasn't got control over it either."*

*RES: No so what we have done and what we've done in the past, we've kind of almost tried to circumvent the system a little bit. So although a*



*warning hasn't been able to be issued, or whatever might be required, we've tried to kind of move it around so that we can still try and meet the student needs. But personally I think we should be able to just manage the situation".*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville University)

A large cause of frustration was around the apparent difference in treatment between research active and non-research active academic staff. This was apparent at each of the institutions in some shape or form:

*"You look at the people that brought in students, spent hours teaching, marking, assessing and managing students to give a good experience, and you look at the amount of money they brought in. You think, "Well, do you know what, who pays for the universities? Not research. It's teaching, and these people are never recognised. You know it, and I know that. I know that within my time at the university, I've probably gone as far as I'm ever going to go. I'll do a good job because I always do a good job for my employer. I refuse to get bitter about it because if it was that bad, I'd leave and go and do something else."*

(Academic Manager 5, Westville University)

Significant focus and value appeared to be placed on research at Westville, where a number of staff reported a sense of inequity, and a lack of opportunity for those that were not viewed as researchers. This had clear implications for promotion as outlined above, but more generally, appeared to contribute to a sense of unfairness around not only the number of hours but the way in which non-research orientated work was appreciated:

*"I would say there are a few members of the group, who are, virtually never say no, and are working hard to achieve a smooth, seamless running of the programmes, under graduate and post graduate, and that there are others who are just there for the ride. I've never seen any publications, I don't know if they publish, nothing's transparent, we don't see what people are doing anymore. So I've got to look, how do I know if one of my colleagues have published a load of papers or not, to justify not teaching."*

(Managed Academic 3, Westville University)

It is important here to note that those staff who were research orientated might well have been successfully publishing material. However, often there was a lack of connection and information sharing to promote such successes, leaving staff who primarily teach to wonder about the contribution of staff who are afforded research time. Several staff bemoaned the lack of meetings in which all staff shared information; the removal of such activities perhaps adding to the wider picture of the lack of importance placed on people management.

In order to balance some of the observations of teaching staff above, it is useful to include some commentary from a Professor at Robbins. They clearly explain the conflicting demands placed upon them and how they believe their work towards research is perceived by teaching staff and those with management responsibility for teaching. They also explain the demands of their time in terms of teaching and research:

*"That's a really good question because I think it causes a tension. As a professor, I've got to keep that lot happy over there with my publications. This lot here (teaching staff) don't care whether I publish or not. Not so*

*much Debbie, but more with another colleague. He's the overall program manager, and then me and Sally the program leaders. He also is a program leader, so he manages himself. He wants me to do more on the program.*

*Interviewer: More teaching?*

*Interviewee: More teaching. If he had his way I'd spend 24/7 looking after the students. That's only a fifth of my role. I also have to teach, I have to do research, I have to do all this other stuff. I basically say, I can do so much in the program and that's it. I think he would prefer somebody else to be doing the job because he would like somebody who would just do--*

*He'll always come up with things that need to be done and need to be improved. He does it for the right reasons, but it's very micromanaged, so there's a great conflict between-- He doesn't care whether I'm under pressure for the REF. All he cares about is that the programs run properly. I do a good job of the program leadership, but I am thinking about giving up in a year's time because I feel there's so much pressure with the two role, the three roles, the teaching, the program, and the professorial role. As a prof, I probably shouldn't be doing it".*

*(Managed Academic 13, Robbins)*

This quote was symptomatic of accounts elsewhere which suggested a lack of understanding, and potential divide between teaching and research staff. The respondent above, in trying to maintain both roles appeared to actually be under greater pressure. There is potential for this because of an apparent lack of understanding and appreciation for the duality of teaching and research roles at managerial level. Often the focus (and responsibility) of senior management was on

*either* teaching *or* research, meaning one is viewed as of lesser importance. Furthermore, issues of structure (addressed in section 7.1) mean that gathering holistic accounts of performance is problematic.

A number of the points raised within this section present a mixed picture, largely underpinned by a sense of unfairness, a lack of transparency and arguably a lack of appreciation between staff on teaching and research contracts. None of the issues presented here are so serious as to lead to formal action in the form of grievances or disciplinaries, but highlight an environment which might foster disengagement, or have implications for motivation.

### **7.3.2 Motivation** *“There’s nothing that’s motivating me to push me up and there’s nothing that stops me from falling down”*

The topic of motivation was interesting, both managers and employees reported that motivation was generally intrinsic and as a consequence of staff’s own professionalism and commitment rather than as a result of institutional policy or managerial approaches. Managers suggested that they were extremely limited in their ability to reward good performance in a tangible way and expressed some frustration around this:

*“I believe and it’s an opinion, but it’s (motivation) mainly driven through their own sense of wanting to do the job and professionalism and caring about how they conduct themselves. Clearly then it’s my job to try and merge that with institutional KPI’s and some work together and some are nonsensical. I wish there was a structured way of doing it and I have approached HR in the past to see what’s available. There was a fund back in the day, there’s no longer in existence but I think there should be some-- so there’s a*

*promotion round out (...) there's lots of strings attached to that so. So, for me an incentive system or not so much an incentive more the extra over and above on lots of collegiate base activities or fill gaps that emerged and everyone else looked to the floor. I'll let my dean know that you've done this, and that's it. I find that frustrating."*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown University)

Whilst professionalism and the intent to do a good job was at the forefront of respondents mind, others remarked that fear over their job security and concerns around redundancy were highly prominent in their willingness to take on work and continue to do a good job. In fact when asked about reward one respondent said the following: "keep your job, that's good enough reward" (Managed Academic 10, Mortown). Therefore, despite motivation levels being high, this came from quite a negative position of self-preservation, rather than a position of being recognised and rewarded by the institution.

Respondents from Westville cited a lack of any systematic approach to motivation and how performance management systems failed to serve as a motivational tool in a meaningful way. The absence of reward for good performance, and as discussed previously, the avoidance of challenging the performance of those deemed to be poorly performing meant that the process had little apparent value:

*"I think even my days in the private sector, the appraisal system was used to incentivise people. I use the term carrot and stick, but people need a challenge in any job and they need something to work towards, where they are going to see some benefit of it. But the appraisal system that we've got, there's no incentive, there's no guarantee of promotion, there's no*

*guarantee of a pay rise. There's none of that going on whatsoever."*

(Managed Academic 2, Westville University)

This narrative was repeated elsewhere and consequently the discretionary effort that some staff had been displaying was eroded. This was particularly noticeable when positive aspects of performance were not acknowledged, and conversely, easily managed, quantifiable aspects of performance were scrutinised more closely. A clear example at Westville came from an academic who had launched (and recruited to) several new programmes, this, it was felt was not recognised, yet the marking deadline of 20 days (from coursework submission to return to students), was rigidly upheld by management, regardless of personal circumstances. A sense of what can be measured will be managed seemed to prevail:

*"On a score of one to ten, I'm just bumbling along at six, because I've lost any incentive to do things now, like I made all these programmes that we're doing, all the top ups, I was the instigator on them, the (redacted) Programmes, I rejigged them, got them all through. So since 2007 I think was the last time I did a big one, I'd done these little ones, I've said to myself, I'm not following it, I'm not going to do any more programmes, because what's the point.*

*INT: Is that due to the fact of the lack of recognition?*

*RES: It's just because no one cares, there is no management. It's less work for me."*

(Managed Academic 3, Westville University)

The alleged absence of management here was in stark contrast to the experience of the same academic when their marking was returned late due to some personal circumstances.

*“I was late back at the beginning of this year, beginning of 2016, with handing in my coursework, it was after the twenty days, and the reason was that was purely from personal family ill health and I had to spend a lot of time at home, and I could not mark any work fairly for the students. So I actually said “I cannot mark it, because my mind is elsewhere”, my wife had a Stroke and. But he will, my subject leader keeps bringing it up now and saying “You were late with your coursework last year, don’t be late this year”, and I said “Well it was personal circumstances”, and he said “It doesn’t matter, you were late”.*

(Managed Academic 3, Westville University)

This episode arguably points to some poor management practice regarding tact, diplomacy and empathy, but reinforces the idea that only tangible aspects or performance are managed, and that holistic performance might not be accounted for fairly and adequately. This is unsurprising given the aforementioned issues relating to the recruitment, selection and training of managers. Clearly, given the comments from this respondent it also has implications for levels of motivation.

Perceptions around inequity between teaching and research staff have been noted as a source of discontent. At Westville, where research appeared to be far more highly valued than teaching, despite a poor showing in the recent TEF, the level of interest in teaching activities appeared to be of significance in the context of motivation. The combination of emphasis on research within the institution and the lack of data

available in relation to teaching practice has negative connotations for teaching practice. Feedback from the following respondent explains that those wishing to teach feel that they are not recognised and those that wish to progress their careers try to make space for research by avoiding teaching.

*“...teaching is not really valued even though I came here to be a teacher, so you’ve got people who know that game, they’ve got it and they know that that’s not rewarded so they do the bare minimum on that and that’s a good career move.*

*I want to make a difference and really you can only make a difference on what you do I’ve noticed here. You can’t make a difference in what someone else does because there’s no motivators, there’s no strings you can pull, there’s no accountability, there’s no data, so”.*

(Managed Academic 5, Westville)

At Robbins, there appeared to be a healthier balance between teaching and research and the respective value placed on the activities. Whilst a number of the issues around data and measurement of teaching performance remained, the fact that teaching staff didn’t feel secondary to researchers seemed to have a positive effect. Furthermore, the opportunities for progression did not appear to be limited to a research pathway, indeed two of the managed academic staff from Robbins spoke positively of the potential for promotion or development:

*“And I think there are so many different roles within the School, that when a vacancy comes up, there are plenty of opportunities for people to progress.”*

(Managed Academic 11, Robbins University)



This optimism is in stark contrast to some staff from Westville who clearly felt that an absence of opportunity, recognition and management had a negative impact on levels of motivation.

*“I feel now well even if I do my average role because I’m not going to get promoted anyway then if anything went wrong there’s no accountability anyway, so what’s, what is the game? There’s nothing that’s motivating me to push me up and there’s nothing that stops me from falling down.”*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville)

The evidence from a number of participants on this topic tend to suggest that it is the absence of consistent managerial interventions that has implications for motivation. Furthermore, the absence of reward was seen as a frustration for managers, as they were constrained by a lack of tangible reward systems, managed academics reported a lack of recognition. The absence of data and indeed interest in the full gamut of the academic role seemed, in part at least, to be responsible for lack of acknowledgement of a job well done. Furthermore, where evidence is available and quantifiable the tendency is that this is attended to by management and areas which are more opaque are neglected.

**7.3.3 Workload** *“Posts have not been filled when people have gone. The work’s got to be done, somehow.”*

A number of factors appeared to have led to a shared sense that the workload amongst academic staff had increased. This was particularly true of those with either people management or programme leader responsibilities. Furthermore, as this section will explain, there was a sense that frustration arose, not from heavier workloads, but around sensitivities regarding workload parity with colleagues.

Some of the perceptions in relation to increased workload emerged as a consequence of the increasingly competitive HE market. This resulted in academic staff having to do more recruitment activity such as telephone calls to students and attendance at open days:

*"We always did a recruitment activity but now they came fast through the year, weekends, evenings and you used to have at least August where you could have a bit of down time now you've got summer schools in there and you've got open days potentially there you had re-sits in there*

*There's no period of the academic year where staff get a bit of space. There's two areas really I mean you've got the recruitment activity was intensified and there's the marketing department, lean on us quite heavily for expertise. I can understand."*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)

Whilst the external market has inevitably shaped the role of academics in relation to student recruitment, other issues have also had a more negative impact. Tuition fees and the removal of the student number cap have seen institutions seeking to reduce both academic and or administrative staffing levels. This was the case in two of the institutions within this research, and meant that workload increased for those staff that remained:

*"Over the years I've been here, we've had two or three rounds of cuts and redundancies. Posts have not been filled when people have gone. The work's got to be done, somehow."*

(Academic Manager 8, Westville.)

At Westville, academics reported that they were working at up to 170% of their workload for significant periods of time and that this had resulted in people “cracking up” and going off “stressed”. Clearly, in pockets of institutions the impact of being overworked has had a hugely damaging effect. In the context of performance management, staff who are overworked will not be able to produce to the same standard, if the quantity of their work is excessive. The potentially cyclical effect might then impact on measures of student satisfaction particularly in key areas like teaching and feedback.

The situation at Westville was repeated at Mortown, although to a lesser extent, with academic staff reporting that they had to pick up on modules from colleagues who had been made redundant. Occasionally, these modules were in areas where little expertise remained, meaning that significant amounts of time and effort were put into achieving a level of understanding which was sufficient to deliver the teaching. Managerial responses to such issues were allegedly somewhat blunt:

*“...the only line is more probably explicit definitely implicit is some people have been made redundant, and you're lucky to have a job, not explicit, but that's about as close as it gets to an explanation (...) Everyone is impacted because of just the stress of knowing people are leaving. I've got a second year module that I was running with this person who has left.”*

(Managed Academic 10, Mortown University)

The picture was healthier at Robbins, which had managed to buck the trend and recruit students in consistent numbers, meaning that staff ratios were maintained. Reports of work intensification and higher levels of stress were more forthcoming from respondents at Mortown and Westville.

Whilst a lack of available resourcing is not unique to the HE sector, there was a partial acknowledgement from managed academics, that there was little that managers could do to address the situation. What caused greater resentment and frustration was occasions where respondents felt that workload had increased because of the poor performance of others. A number of managers were candid enough to acknowledge that they gave work of higher importance to staff whom they regarded as good performers, particularly around student recruitment or large lectures:

*“You pick the people you know are going to perform well in there. That issue, all those that workload is increasing in demand and the same people get rolled out, then that workload becomes higher.”*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)

There was a sense that managers, often under huge pressure themselves, had little time to attend to people management issues. Therefore the tendency to ask staff whom they consider to be performing well was perhaps understandable. To place this explanation into context, the following assertion was powerful:

*“You only need to look around at some of our subject group leaders, to see how haggard and exhausted they look at the end of an academic year. You don’t need to look very far to see individuals who are on their knees, and I think especially group leaders. Although I think my workload doesn’t recognise the size of the job, I still think I’m much better than off than group leaders.”*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

The research has already identified the lack of support and training that academic managers tend to receive, and the lack of time is clearly another issue. One manager

reported that they had 4 hours per semester allocated for people management, and that they had 10 staff to manage. In this context, managers can perhaps be forgiven for allocating work in a less than consistent manner.

However, this also meant that high performing staff often took on additional duties to compensate for colleagues seen to be less effective. There was a sense within the sample that this led to frustration and that, despite professed notions of collegiality, this created resentment and potential conflict between staff:

*"I was having a conversation with a colleague last week and she'd been put on to teach a module and didn't really have any interest in doing it. The only other person was someone who is a bit notorious for not being particularly good. And she was complaining, "well if you're not very good here, then you'll get away with a lot more", (...) If you're seen as a safe pair of hands, (...) then you'll get lumbered with more work to do because you're seen as good... if you are seen as a good lecturer (...) then more work gets put on you. Yes, you end up, your work intensifies, while people that aren't necessarily seen as particularly good would find they have a lighter workload. Not lighter, but they'll have less demanding in terms of teaching and being through modules, they might have more admin responsibility."*

(Managed Academic 12, Robbins)

These perceptions were more acute at Mortown and Westville, which had both undergone more fundamental organisational change with greater pressures on staffing levels. The following quote from a Westville academic illustrates the sense of unfairness caused by the removal of workload being a response to poor performance:

*"I mean I do think there are people that are under workload because of the way that they are, that nobody wants them on their modules which is annoying".*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville)

However it also suggests that some academics would like to see more robust management of performance. Those performing well appear frustrated by the inaction of management, particularly when this results in greater work for those performing well and less work for those performing badly.

There was a sense that due to the complexity of the academic role, workload allocation systems were less than accurate in terms of capturing the reality of the labour process. Within the sample, this had led to issues between managed academics and their managers:

*"...for a couple of members of staff, they see that they are over [workload] and they are, or they see some of the allowances that they get for things which I don't have any control over and then they complain to me about the size of the allowance because they say well it takes twice as much time as that. Yes, but it is a standardised allowance and I can't change it. I've had a couple of things like that. So yes there are some things where people are pressurising me to change things that I can't change, I can't do anything about."*

(Academic Manager 2, Westville)

There were other reports that senior managers didn't use the workload allocation figures in a meaningful way and that reports of staff that were significantly over their allocation were dismissed. Clearly some kind of system is required to monitor and

manager individual workload, however, it appears that the complexity, ambiguity and subjectivity make this a challenge for both managers and staff alike. Furthermore, the desire to maintain autonomy and reluctance to manage, let alone micro-manage seems to also play a role.

Across all institutions within this research, there were reports that workload allocations were generally kept confidential by managers as when these were made transparent it could cause conflict between staff. This not only led to mistrust but undermined the sense of fairness in such processes. This in turn had the potential to erode trust between employee and manager and impact on the discussions during performance appraisals, particularly in respect of ratings, as staff could argue that comparisons of performance are unfair if there is disparity in workload:

*“They used to email out, everyone could see everyone's. A couple of years ago they said they're not going to do that because it causes too much trouble and people are always taking more of an interest in what other people are doing since they've done that. Because if there's something to hide and it's clearly a plus and a minus in making that change (...) Now, it's got to the stage where there's so little communication between--, or so little transparency between the deployment, and it's getting slightly logistically difficult to do some planning.”*

(Managed Academic 10, Mortown.)

Despite growing work intensification, there remained a sense that academics still enjoyed greater autonomy and discretion than in other occupations. For example, one member of staff reported that whilst their work had become more pressured, it was not at the level they had previously experienced in the private sector. They did however

indicate that they felt the direction of travel was to more intensive pattern of work. Clearly, in measuring individual performance, managers need to be aware of the impact of increases in quantity of work and make reasonable concessions in terms of the expectations of staff:

*“Don’t get me wrong, this isn’t a holiday and it’s getting more challenging year on year, but still compared to working in the private sector where it’s a real dog eat dog. I think we are getting towards that, we’re getting ever closer to that sort of environment, but we’re not there yet and we’re some way away, thankfully I might add, but I think it’s coming and by the time you retire or get to retirement age, we will be fully there I guess.”*

(Managed Academic 2, Westville University)

Overall, questions around workload inevitably lead to a range of impassioned responses and whilst there was a consensus that the workload had increased, the most pressing concerns, particularly for managed academics, was a perception of a lack of transparency (on occasions) and a lack of fairness. This was particularly the case with regards to equity, and specifically relating to staff whose performance was considered to be sub-standard.

#### **7.3.4 Relationships with Colleagues** *“If you’re in the “in” group, you’re ok...”*

Several of the issues covered so far within this chapter deal with the impact of performance management on relationships between colleagues. However, I also found clear evidence that collegial relationships between appraiser and appraisee shaped approaches to performance. This was particularly true given the problems surrounding objective measurement, which meant that subjectivity and anecdotal evidence played a significant role in shaping managerial perceptions of performance:



*“I think the problem does come if I’m perceived to be underperforming or somebody makes a judgment that I’m underperforming, how is that going to be – so it does feel very subjective and based on, as I said earlier on, whether your face fits, whether you’re in this popularist group or whether you’re somebody who sits outside (...) If you’re in the in group you’re okay, if you’re in the out group, you could find it very difficult to maybe demonstrate that you are performing to the standard, because I don’t think there’s anything set down (...) if you’re a teaching academic, you could find yourself at the whim of the popular belief of some of the students and other colleagues.”*

(Managed Academic 2, Westville)

This view was substantiated by other respondents within this research. There was a sense that managerial decisions were made in the context of a face-fitting culture, driven in part at least, because of the absence of evidence for objective decision making a lack of transparency. Regardless of the accuracy of these assertions, such perceptions create a picture of conflict and damaged relationships. There was also a suggestion that established staff aligned themselves to those they considered to have power, and that they gamed the workload system. Such a climate has serious connotations for fairness in the evaluation of employee performance, where relationships might be used and manipulated in order to achieve positive outcomes from appraisal processes. The opportunity for collusion between manager and employee (or appraiser and appraise) is clear, particularly given the suggestion that HR are often only interested in the performance rating, and not the qualitative aspect of such discussions. The result for those whose faces don’t fit tends to be apathy and resignation:

*"I used to care, but I don't really care anymore because everyone's playing a little game, just putting a knife in here, putting a knife in there to cover their own lack of work or stuff like that (...) I'd say the ones who have been here longer, people see people come and go, they know the game, how it works, they keep just enough work load. Yeah, they, but they, people just generally talk about each other.*

*INT: And so do you think some of the decisions that are made are more on the basis of relationships rather than hard facts and hard evidence*

*RES: Yeah, all the time"*

*(Managed Academic 5, Westville)*

There are a range of reasons for individuals to wish to attempt to portray themselves in a more positive light than their colleagues. Some of this can perhaps be explained by: the increase in surveillance of the academic labour process; an increasing awareness of teaching and contact time and other metrics such as feedback from students, perhaps leading to defensive or manipulative behaviour. Alternative causes could be due to the increased pressure on resources as a consequence of the changes within the sector, and an increasing focus on and reward for individualism rather than collective achievement. There was a suggestion that those striving for promotion would perhaps align themselves to specific individuals with power to assist with their career progression and act in a way that was damaging to others to promote their own interests and ambitions. As such damage was done to the wider, collective harmony of the subject groups:

*"Then you've got the agendas of looking for promotion and people will align themselves with people or individuals in order to sort of seek promotion,*

*which is nothing wrong with that. Then you've got the very ambitious people. So, these in/out groups do exist, but they exist in all walks of life so I think it really depends on who's leading those in/out groups and what are they doing to address those in/out groups."*

(Managed Academic 2, Westville)

There was a strong suggestion that existing relationships were exploited in order to achieve promotion for some academic staff, and that this had a negative impact on others, again, driven by a lack of transparency and perceptions of bias and favouritism:

*"When I look at the wider picture of the promotion process in the department. I realize that it's all a scam in most instances to give a pay rise to cronies. That's what I see PDR in that context irrespective of the person who does it with me I think it's still a flawed system (...) In most instances some do deserve promotion, but in most instances the way I notice it's being done at least in this university and I've seen that in other universities it's a way to promote friends and colleagues."*

(Managed Academic 9, Westville)

An absence of structure also appeared to cause tensions between academics. The flatter organisational structure and nuanced, contested lines of authority created an environment where issues could arise. This is of particular interest given the perception from some that academic staff do not need to be managed:

*"We don't have a Discipline Group Leader, we have a Head of School and we have a Programme Leader and I think because our Programme Leader has a confusion of her lines of responsibility, that they do feel that they manage individuals rather than the programme, it does create a sense of*

*ambiguity and frustrations. But it was that sense of actually, because there's a responsibility, it's not open and spoken about and frankly considered, it's purely about this underhanded approach (...) I would go on to say it's conflict, it's passive aggressive conflict and I'm finding myself digging my trench and getting ready to put my tin hat on and because there are no clear lines and no performance indicators and no direction..."*

(Managed Academic 2, Westville)

The reluctance of managers at Westville to address issues with staff also had wider implications for relationships between staff. The frustration felt at the lack of managerial intervention has already been presented, but the following quote explains that some staff, keen to protect their programme (and presumably the subsequent student feedback and metrics that follow) had to often take action themselves, within their limited area of authority, which consequently damaged relationships:

*"I've gone to quite hard, strong lengths really to try and overcome the problem which quite often has been okay I'm just going to have them (poor performing staff) off the programme, they're not going to teach on the programme anymore. Which leaves a group leader with a real problem because it means that you've got enough workload capacity but if people don't want those people to work on the programme and that's exactly what I've done in previous years. I've just ... that's something that I can do, can set up as the programme ... I have got that authority, if you like because I can say I don't want somebody on the programme and I've done that and that doesn't make me especially popular."*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville)

Similar issues to those discussed above were mentioned at Robbins, where it was felt that performance problems weren't addressed. Again, the evidence suggests that the reluctance or inability of managers to tackle issues has a wide ranging effect and impacts upon relationships between colleagues:

*"There's absolutely a sense that some people are here for a free ride, and you can see that they're here for the term, they do their teaching, that's it they're done, I'm off now."*

(Managed Academic 12, Robbins)

The following rather lengthy quote explains clearly the impact that managerial reluctance has on relationships between colleagues. Issues of avoidance in this instance, demonstrate that issues can fester and escalate and have a lasting damaging effect:

*"...there's one colleague who was, was junior to me but certainly didn't think they were junior to me and there were all sorts of concerns about the way this particular individual behaved. They were a very good teacher (...) they got good feedback from students and the external people they dealt with. But the way they did things was quite problematic at times. The way they related to other staff was problematic, but nobody really wanted to take that individual on and address things because one they knew that they would retaliate because of the character and the head of school was in fear of them as well. So the head of school would never have done anything and therefore dealing with that situation was very difficult. Eventually that individual came into quite a very serious conflict with another member of staff which involved a really quite unpleasant situation which spiralled out*

*of control and which I then had to sort of try to manage retrospectively (...)*  
*We managed to sort of resolve in some respects but the relationship between those two individuals was broken and I think looking back on it because, because this person's behaviours weren't really nipped in the bud in the first instance, because they were a very, what's the word, assertive individual, with lots of strengths but the problem areas weren't really nipped in the bud".*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

The academic environment, one which is status-laden, and ambiguous, provides fertile ground for relationships to be misused and manipulated. Where issues around the labour process are opaque and lacking in transparency, the potential for distrust and the formation of "in-groups" is heightened as a means of maintaining one's own position.

**7.3.5 Relationship with Line Manager** *"I don't know if it damaged our relationship, but I think it came as quite a shock to him".*

Unsurprisingly given the context of this research, relationships with managers as a consequence of performance management practices was a highly charged topic. Positively, several staff reported strong relationships with their line manager and appraiser:

*"She's very approachable. It's very much a dialogue. It's very much driven by me as the employee. It's based on how things have gone but it's very future focused...I have targets. If I don't hit the targets then I'm not beaten around the head. It's discussed in context, so I would hope there's usually a good reason why I haven't produced the draft of that paper. That's*

*because I took on that program leadership role and that brought in a whole new load of workload. Yes. I'm quite satisfied really. I quite like it."*

(Managed Academic 11, Robbins)

Where relationships with the line manager (appraiser) were already good, performance discussions tended to go smoothly and caused no problems between the appraiser and appraisee:

*"Yeah, it's really positive. There's no ... I just work closely with Gail about stuff and I feel really supported in that way and have with the other group leaders before, so it's never been a thing."*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville University)

In some cases good relationships provided a context which facilitated difficult, but constructive performance conversations:

*"Actually it was fine because the, I can see that with some people it would be incredibly difficult. With this particular member of staff, who is lovely, just really, really bad at admin, and also he held his hands up. He knew there was a problem, he knew there was a problem and smiled his way through me telling him off about it. He said yes, shrugged his shoulders, and said yes I know I'm bad at that, and as I say it was good in terms of the relationship, it was useful because it was the first PDR we'd done and obviously it wasn't a great start but I was also able to say actually I am really pleased with this stuff, you know this is really good, this other stuff that is happening (...) as I say it helped enormously that this particular member of staff's personality was very, very helpful."*

(Academic Manager 2, Westville)

The issue of existing relationships certainly appeared to shape discussions for some respondents. One manager described the challenge of having to address performance concerns with a member of staff that they had known for years, and had a positive relationship with. The manager in question had recently taken responsibility for staff appraisal, and the absence of feedback given previously lead to difficult conversation for both parties:

*“It was excruciating, it was someone I’ve known for decades, because I knew them in a previous life, and someone that would consider themselves I think to be quite a good pal of mine [laughing], so it was absolutely excruciating where I had to say “If your performance is compared with others at this level in this kind of role, you have a lot less evidence of X”, so rather than “You’ve been a bit shit”, or “You’ve not been particularly marvellous”, it was “There is less evidence of”, and he was a bit mortified. So I don’t know if it damaged our relationship, but I think it came as quite a shock to him, because he considered that he was doing a really, really good job and had never had any feedback to the contrary.”*

(Academic Manager 4, Westville)

Where relationships were either not as close, or perhaps more importantly, when feedback on performance had not been frequent throughout the year, performance conversations were generally much more difficult and potentially could cause lasting damage to the line manager-staff member relationship.

There was clear evidence of managerial reluctance to address issues of underperformance at Westville in particular. This meant that when performance issues were addressed, reactions were often acute. Avoiding discussions around



performance concerns was seen as a way of maintain relationships and side-stepping potential areas of conflict, not only with individual staff members, but in the wider team:

*“The first one would be the conflict it would create between the manager and the individual. The other one would be I think pinpointing what the weakness was and what needs be done to be fixed. The third one related to the first would be that it would create a wider conflict than the discussion between the manager and the person to be managed; these things tend to bubble over and it would break down that idea of collective action that I think underpins what a lot of academic people do.”*

(Academic Manager 6, Westville)

When managers did address issues, staff reactions were often emotionally charged and damaged relationships as a consequence. This was potentially exacerbated by a number of factors which have already been discussed such as ambiguity in performance targets and measurement, prevailing cultures of autonomy and even ego, leading to a sense that performance should not be questioned. Whilst at Westville there was some evidence that *managers* and *HR* engaged in formal processes too quickly, there was also evidence that managers felt *employee's* formalised issues in a knee-jerk fashion, which spoiled relations:

*“...I've had call for union reps to be present at the next meet type thing, you know "I'm not prepared to discuss this without someone else being present (...) It did make me think again to make sure that what I've done is fair and objective. It's disappointing because I'd like to think that staff generally got a relationship building approach to the work we do, when that comes in, I'm not expecting it. I'm trying to do is informally and not flashlights*

*and point fingers and then suddenly get thrown in with "well i'm not meeting you until we have a union sitting there, I get frustrated by that,*

*"That's damaging personally (...) and I pointed out and asked them the question, "how do you think this is going to help move things forward in our relationship as well?"*

(Academic Manager 10, Mortown)

Clearly managers have a very difficult path to navigate. While managerial inaction can cause an array of problems, so too can proactively tackling performance concerns. Perhaps it is the way in which issues are addressed that is the issue? One manager appeared to enthusiastically target a particular employee at Westville but, according to the account in this research, disregarded the context which led to their perceived under-performance. This had the following impact on the relationship between employee and manager, but also on motivation and discretionary effort:

*"I said "Look Dylan there were circumstances", and he said "It doesn't matter, you were late". So, that's why...I'm not sort of wishing to volunteer or anything, or do anything extra."*

(Managed Academic 3, Westville)

Responses from trade union representatives at Westville cited that frequently members would come to them about issues with their line manager. This is unsurprising given the devolved responsibility to line managers for areas such as performance, and perhaps as a consequence of the more managerialist environment in the sector. The line manager - employee relationship is therefore increasingly prone to conflict:

*“...a lot of the stress is caused by relationships with their line managers.*

*Yes. A lot of stress, work related stress concerns people that are, if they're not on a position of clearly the head of school or whatever they may have some kind of position of power over their staff. Maybe even the program managers or some kind of--yes they come, most of their cases come with that.”*

(Trade Union representative 2, Westville)

The same union representative also explained that when issues reached a point where formal action was required, the organisation tended to focus on employee behaviour rather than that of managers. The perception at least, was that in attempting to defend the organisation, managerial development, or issues with managerial conduct were largely ignored:

*“...when there are clashes like this and perhaps it's obvious that this is a cause for concern. Usually, the solution is not so much to address perhaps the behaviour of the manager. It's to address the behaviour of the staff and a lot of this staff actually leave the university either with some kind of settlement. Sometimes just out of protecting their own health or their own sanity. Sometimes they just leave.”*

(Trade Union representative 2, Westville)

Employees leaving the organisation as a result of a break-down with their manager is nothing new, and not unique to the institution or indeed the sector. However, this evidence underlines the importance of positive relationships between line managers and their employees. Even employees who have generally had positive experiences

can be driven to reconsider their future as a result of what they perceive as ineffective and inexperienced line management, as the following quote illustrates:

*"I've mostly had fantastic line managers actually, really, really good. I've been very lucky in my very varied career, but there have been points when, I think I only once really where I had a very weak line manager and I actually left, because I think that relationship is so crucial. And I could tell that this was someone who was I think meant well but was-- had not been recruited into that role for-- that was not the right person for the role and probably had sort of limited shelf life. But in the meantime that was impacting on my abilities to do my role and my enjoyment of being in the organization."*

(Managed Academic 11, Robbins)

### **7.3.6 Issues of Bullying**

Despite the impact of performance management and manager-employee relationships, there were very limited examples of overt bullying within the three institutions. Where accusations of bullying did occur, these were often related to issues with performance. These claims varied in their nature, ranging from a genuine (though not shared) perception of bullying as detailed below, to a view held by some respondents that accusations were made as a smokescreen or as a means of preventing managerial action:

*"I don't think there's been anything harassment wise at all about it. I think you would ... I think there's been quite a lot of ... there has been issues with poor performance in the team and then complaints have been brought about bullying and harassment when what they've tried to do is manage the performance. And I know that's happened within the team, there's two*

*individuals. That have, I haven't been involved in those but as a bystander, outsider, that was not what happened. What happened was performance was being managed. But I think because performance is never managed when anyone does try and manage it those individuals genuinely and I do mean genuinely think that's bullying and harassment when it's performance management."*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville)

Crucially, as the quote above suggests, the disjuncture between the perceptions of managers and managed academics in such cases is often caused by a failure to manage performance effectively and consistently.

HR practitioners took a slightly different view and argued that staff would frequently make accusations of bullying or take out a grievance in response to some form of managerial action. This suggests that there is a tendency for some claims of bullying to be made in order to delay or cloud disciplinary or capability proceedings:

*"What you find is with some academics, if they are approached by their manager-- even at the start of whatever process it might be, you will find that they will take umbrage to that and raise a grievance or say they're being bullied and harassed by their manager. I find a lot of academics don't accept that they are performing badly. What happens at that point is then, they'll raise a grievance. That will stop the capability process because they've raised the grievance."*

(Human Resource Practitioner 2, Westville)

The HR respondent explained that accusations of bullying often emerge quite quickly, as do grievances when managers legitimately attempt to address issues. Whilst the

conceptual framework does not highlight issues of resistance, clearly contested lines of authority, performance ambiguity, and the management of high status individuals provides fertile ground for negative reactions to performance. The issue of the extent to which senior managers are likely to support front-line managers is also problematic in this regard, as too is the degree to which they set the tone, and clarify expectations around performance management. These issues, and the negative reactions to attempts to manage performance often affects managerial confidence, leading them to attempt to halt disciplinary processes. Accusations (of bullying and such like) were also seen as a reason for managers to shy away from addressing issues in future:

*Respondent: "The poor manager was so upset because he'd been trying to do the right thing the whole time. It had just been switched that actually he was bullying, and undermining, and all that sort of thing. The investigation was actually, you could say it was the member of staff. I think some staff will flip it, so it deflects off them and goes back onto the manager.*

*Interviewer: Almost bully their managers.*

*Respondent: Yes, yes."*

(Human Resource Practitioner 2, Westville)

The theme of upward "bullying" was repeated in a number of interviews. Given the definition of bullying provided in the literature review, the term bullying should perhaps be used with caution, but nonetheless captures occasions when managers are treated poorly and certainly not with the mutuality and respect that should be associated with the employee-manager relationship. The following commentary from a managed academic captured the context in which managers were "bullied" by their team:

*“Their group leader is bullied from the bottom up by some of the people in their Group (...) They don’t invite them to meetings, so when there are strategic programme related meetings, the GL isn’t invited, and apparently challenge every single thing the GL says in Group meetings, and are openly quite rude about this person. So they were saying that they’ll be sitting round a table together as a Group, the GL will say something and they’re sort of tutting and nudging each other and going “Arrh” in response to whatever the poor Group Leader happens to say.”*

(Managed Academic 4, Westville University)

There are various possible explanations for this type of behaviour, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that part of the issue might be the lack of authority and status of managers within academic settings. So too could the variety of management styles and a lack of managerial confidence that might allow such instances to take place. There was evidence that some managers would definitely not tolerate such behaviour, and it would therefore be clumsy to suggest that such treatment of managers is solely related to issues of authority. For example, the following quote from a manager explains that they were more than prepared to challenge poor behaviour, and tackle head on the suggestion that they had been behaving in a bullying fashion when managing performance:

*“...people quite often hear something they don't like and it's often a knee-jerk response where you “you’ve been unfair to me, you’re bullying me into something I don’t want to do”. Actually, do you know what, asking you to do your job properly is not bullying, so again, I won't back down on that. I won't treat them badly or raise my voice. I won't be unfair to them. I will expect them to what we’ve agreed, if they won't agree anything at all, I will tell them*

*that they are not meeting the expectations on the meeting. And then if they have a bad reaction to it then there's a whole procedure to go through. Because I am confident that I don't treat people badly"*

(Academic Manager 5, Westville)

Other examples of bullying, this time from manager to employee, included the withholding of information in order to make things difficult for an individual. There were fairly limited examples where respondents identified issues of managers bullying their sub-ordinates. What was evident was a slightly ham-fisted approach to issues on occasions, and a lack of empathy, but little that was serious enough to be framed as bullying. Where there were more serious accusations of bullying behaviours, it was felt that issues were often swept under the carpet. Indeed, one managed academic reported that they had been bullied due to issues around their mental health, and that senior management and HR had encouraged them to not take the matter further.

It is important to recognise that in many organisations, low levels of formal disciplinary cases and employee grievances are not necessarily evidence of a happy working environment, but rather of one which does not facilitate resolution easily. A number of respondents highlighted that the style often was to let issues "blow over", whilst trade union representatives from Westville reported the occasional use of settlement agreements with the victims of bullying leaving the organisation with financial compensation in return for non-disclosure. The following assertion from an academic manager at Westville captured this well:

*"It's a lack of honesty in a way. I just think that you know I mean, I think in other organisations, private sector or public sector organisations these days they manage performance much more actively. It's more transparent. They*



*manage it, they identify problem, they deal with those problems. They're open that their organisations have that problem and they may need to take action against individuals sometimes or help them to improve. I think here we sort of deny there are problems and the academics deny that the collegiality doesn't really work in the current environment. They deny that academics bully academics. They deny that that sort of things happen so if a case does occur they just bury it by paying somebody off or trying to make it all go away. They really don't want to deal with it. There's a lack of acknowledgement that the pressures exist and there's a lack of acknowledgement that we don't have the proper competences and capabilities and capacity to deal with those pressures."*

(Academic Manager 3, Westville)

### **7.3.7 Summary**

This section has served to explore the extent to which performance management leads to conflict within the three institutions in the sample. Despite frustration at perceived managerial inaction, there was evidence that when managers attempted to address performance concerns, this could result in conflict in the form of grievances, and accusations of bullying or unfair treatment. This might explain to some extent why managers were reluctant to address issues, and why there was a perception from managed academics that little was done to tackle performance issues. It was somewhat surprising to note that there was also some evidence of "upwards" bullying from employees to their managers. Importantly the evidence suggested that this was exacerbated by the lack of authority and status enjoyed by many line managers and consequently inconsistency in approaches to the management of performance.

The findings more consistently reported a sense of dissatisfaction, and to use Purcell's language, disengagement. Paradoxically, this was often based on perceptions of an absence of management of poor performance, and concerns of inequity in workload, both leading to a sense of unfairness.

#### **7.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has attempted to shed light on the multitude of perceptions from respondents across the three institutions, to give a balanced account of not only performance management practices, but the numerous factors which contribute to such processes, and the inevitable impact of these constructs.

In some respects, the findings revealed a number of consistent themes across all three case-study institutions. Of particular interest was the prevalence of matrix structures, leading to issues of a lack of accountability and observation of the holistic labour process. This was particularly acute at Westville and there were comments from Robbins which suggested similar problems. The scale of operations at Mortown meant that managers had greater control and surveillance abilities. There were shared perceptions from each institution around the nature and value of performance management systems, with many respondents labelling them as fairly meaningless tick box exercises. There was a sense that senior management were reluctant to support line managers in tackling difficult issues, and a paradox as managers labelled HR as risk averse (at Robbins) or too quick to engage in formal processes (at Westville).

It is challenging to accurately summarise the complexities, nuances and comparisons provided within this chapter. The intention behind this chapter was to allow the participants to speak in their own voice, and, whilst supplementing the data with my

own commentary, to essentially allow the data to speak for itself and the voice of participants to be heard. The following chapter will make connections between the research findings and the literature, using the research questions as a lens for this discussion.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION**

### **8.0 Introduction**

The previous chapter provided a detailed examination of the research findings using stages 1 – 5 of the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2008). The sixth and final stage which Braun and Clarke (ibid) suggest is the production of a report. Within this final stage, it is proposed that the report should go beyond merely describing the data and instead should make arguments that directly relate to the research question(s). To that end, this discussion chapter is structured by using the research questions as headings, to ensure that each question is addressed in a coherent manner. The main purpose of the chapter is to articulate how the findings answer the research questions, and furthermore to frame these findings within the context of the existing literature on the topic.

### **8.1 How is the impact of performance management processes shaped by managerial attitudes and behaviour?**

The research clearly identifies that the behaviour and attitude of managers towards performance management has a significant impact on the value of appraisal processes. The extent to which practices such as appraisal are considered meaningful by those being appraised evidently correlates with managerial approaches to such discussions. There was clear evidence of laissez-faire attitudes to performance management, and in many cases managerial values and mind-sets undermined informal attempts to address poor performance or the effectiveness of formal processes. Simmons and Iles (2001) describe old universities as adopting a high trust and non-interventionist approach to the management of people, suggesting that post-92 universities might operate differently and adopt more managerialist

stances. However, my research found that Westville in particular adopts a similar approach to that described by Simmons and Iles, despite appearances of bureaucracy and hierarchy. The extent to which the approach is based on high trust is unclear, arguably the lack of intervention and scrutiny is instead due to the lack of value and importance given to performance issues. Senior management were described as being reticent to become embroiled in people management issues generally, and with one or two exceptions, showed little interest in performance discussions. Robbins was more performance orientated and had greater clarity around managerial positions, yet there was still a sense that the management of performance could be handled with more precision and collaboration amongst managers. To this end, the research supports the work of Broad and Goddard (2012, p.64) that "...internal performance measurement and related management was perceived as having little importance..." within two of the case study institutions. Mortown on the other hand, seemed to take greater interest in performance and had a management structure that lent itself to more meaningful discussions as authority and responsibility was more obvious. However, this could be largely explained by its size, reducing the span of authority and control. However, even here, where the picture was more positive, many staff were critical of the meaning and value of performance management systems.

These sentiments could be seen most vividly at Westville in the description of managers (in one instance a Head of School) offering to complete appraisals over email. No clearer example of the "tick-box" mentality, widely reported in relation to appraisal (see Marr and Creelman, 2011; Chubb *et al.*, 2011) needs to be presented. The lack of meaning and value given to the appraisal and wider performance management practices by a number of managers undermined the process. This is perhaps unsurprising; the prescriptive literature suggests that performance

management processes should be “owned and driven” by the line manager, (see Decramer *et al.*, 2012, Biron *et al.*, 2011 and Rees and Porter, 2003) yet there was no evidence of managers being involved in the design and delivery of performance management practices across the case-study institutions. Furthermore, line managers were often isolated and lacked consistent support from senior managers in tackling performance issues, or were not perceived as being managers in any case. McGregor, in 1957, highlighted the reluctance of managers to engage with traditional appraisal practices, and their reticence to judge and criticise others. These points remain valid today and for managers (or appraisers) in academic settings, are potentially amplified, not least because of notions of collegiality, but also due to the lack of support from senior leaders, which in many cases meant that line managers were less likely to address performance concerns.

The role of senior managers should not be underestimated, when considering the cause of line manager behaviour in managing performance. Despite the rhetoric around managerialism within the HE sector, the numerous league tables and KPI's allegedly leading to a taxonomical culture (Waller, 2004, and Martin and Sauvegeot, 2011) I found that the majority of managers were under little pressure to manage performance. Senior managers, recognised as being pivotal in shaping strategy, translating and communicating objectives (Armstrong, 2006 and CIPD. 2015) were highlighted, to a large extent, as anonymous within the performance discourse. Heads of School were often keen to avoid performance concerns, to let them “blow over”, and avoid the negative connotations that might emerge from them being meaningfully addressed. Little value or importance was placed on conflict management and when interventions did exist these often resulted in a deference to formal policy and procedure (Saundry *et al.*, 2014). The detached approach of most senior managers

was received with a mixed response; there was a sense that some line managers merely conformed and were grateful to have an excuse not to intervene, but for those that did have cause to take managerial action, the absence of support left them feeling exposed and vulnerable. Often, pressure to tackle performance issues came from other members of departments rather than from senior managers. Managers that did receive support and guidance from senior leaders appeared to be more confident in tackling issues. Indeed this finding lends weight to assertions from Hutchinson and Tailby (2014, p.1) that organisations should “provide HR and senior management support for line managers to improve HRM and organisational effectiveness”.

The role of HR within performance discussions was found to be highly reactive, and this too impacted upon managerial behaviour. At Westville, the business partner model in place meant that some managers had limited access to the HR function as HR tended to work with Heads of School or the Dean. Numerous reports from management and ‘managed academics’ suggested that HR were only interested in the performance rating, or where ratings were not required, evidence of completion of the appraisal. This gives credence to the critical performance literature (Marr and Creelman, 2011; Hoverstadt, 2009) that suggests that performance systems are often used as a means of satisfying internal audits and do little to inform or support strategic imperatives. There appeared to be a lack of connection between management and HR, not due to turf wars or role conflict (Perry and Kulik, 2008), but instead because line managers, and those with responsibility for appraisal were not always treated as managers, nor had their managerial position recognised by HR. Evidence of relationships between HR and management could usually be found with more senior managers rather than front-line managers. The extent to which line managers were perceived as having formal line management responsibility was debated not just by

HR, but also by staff whom were being appraised. Line managers often struggled to attain legitimate authority, for a number of reasons which will be discussed in section 8.2. However, the fact that their position was contested, had clear implications for their attitude and behaviour.

The experience of managers, and the inadequacy of their training and development is a recurring theme in the literature, and one which is also reflected in my research (see Perry and Kulik, 2008, Decramer, *et al.*, 2012 and Acas, 2014). Issues around a lack of training and experience inevitably affected manager's confidence in handling performance discussions. Some managers appeared to not ask for the support of HR, nor appear to seek out training, and used the hands off approach of the organisation as a means of avoiding HR and performance responsibility. This was particularly acute at Westville and to a lesser extent at Robbins.

In many respects there was some empathy from HR in relation to the challenges line managers faced, and yet there was a lack of adequate training and ongoing support in order to develop their capacity as managers. HR respondents confidently articulated the shortcomings of line managers and the management of performance within their institution, in almost pejorative terms. Yet despite being able to outline these problems, they were either unable or unwilling to offer solution(s). There was a sense that ambiguity, not just in performance targets or in structure (although these challenges were clearly illuminated) impeded managers, but so too did a lack of certainty around expectations of them (Thornhill and Saunders, 2008). Many managers seemed uncertain as to: the nature of their role; whether or not they should tackle poor performance; what support they could provide to employees; and how they could reward employees for high levels of performance. This lack of direction can arguably be explained by the distance between HR and front-line managers and the



apparent lack of input from senior leaders. This often led to a tendency for reactive input once issues had escalated which might have been resolved informally, and more quickly if senior management had supported earlier intervention, or if closer links between front line managers and HR had been forged. The nuanced, devolved role of line managers in academic settings was a prevailing problem, and one which will be discussed in more detail in section 8.2.

The evidence of the remote role of HR in supporting front line managers, and arguably, preferring to work more strategically with senior management, can perhaps be used to challenge prescriptive models such as Ulrich (1997) which suggests that HR can provide, distinct, multi-faceted roles simultaneously, and supports critique from Hailey *et al.*, (2005) that a more pluralist, misaligned reality exists between HR, line managers and other stakeholders.

This amalgam of factors, the lack of support from HR, the perceived lack of interest from senior management in performance, and the lack of confidence line managers had in fulfilling their role inevitably meant that managers were reluctant to address problems, which often resulted in poor performers being moved or having workload removed from them, rather than inadequate performance itself being addressed. This in turn contributed to wider senses of unfairness and frustration among staff. Acas (2014) highlight lower morale and employee turnover as two prominent outcomes of poor people management. The current uncertainty in the sector means that employee turnover is arguably less likely, however the impact on morale was clearly evidenced. Consequently, a significant proportion of managed academics that I interviewed actually wanted clearer management of performance. This is in stark contrast to the extant literature which tends to emphasise the disdain for, and resistance against, the more robust management of performance and application of systems of appraisal

(Holcomb, 2006). Respondents who were high performers, or comfortable with their performance, were frustrated by the laissez-faire approach to people and performance management. The sense that those underperforming staff were “getting away with it” led to frustration, which far outweighed concerns about having their own performance managed. This was an intriguing and somewhat surprising finding.

Whilst the attitude and behaviour of managers undoubtedly compromised the effectiveness of performance management processes, this was perhaps understandable. At Westville and Robbins, they were permitted by the organisation to not tackle performance and were under little pressure to do so. Furthermore, the support to do so appropriately was lacking, meaning that many managers chose the easier option of avoiding challenging conversations. Managers also demonstrated a lack of assurance and understanding around the purpose of aspects of the performance management system, particularly the PDR. This again is an evidence base for the lack of connection between HR and managers, as their opinion was not solicited around the design of the system. Whilst it is the line manager that is often in the eye of the storm and the recipient of a number of criticisms, particularly within literature from the HR perspective, it is important to note that their opinions are neglected from HR design (Bredin and Söderlund, 2007). My research supports this assertion and led to a lack of buy-in around the PDR system, which might have improved had management been involved in the design of the system. So too might their understanding of what is required of them during such discussions, as for some, this was quite ambiguous.

This research has considered the range of antecedents that lead to managerial inaction. Given the lack of pressure, direction and support from senior managers, the distanced relationship between HR and line managers, and the lack of experience or

training and development that managers enjoy, is it any wonder that a hands off, laissez-faire approach is the result? Such findings are particularly alarming, given the vital role of line managers in translating and delivering HR policy and practice (Truss, 2001 and Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). In addition, it is line managers who are best placed to harvest improved employee engagement, discretionary effort, and ultimately, performance (Hutchinson and Tailby, 2014; Gilbert *et al.*, 2010 and Andersen, *et al.*, 2007). Given the competitive marketplace within the HE space, it is clear that greater investment in the development of managers (both front-line and senior) is required, and that relationships between HR, senior managers and front line managers could be far more cohesive.

## **8.2 How are these issues affected by issues of power, control and the academic environment?**

There was a lack of evidence within my research that power was meaningfully exercised across the three institutions. Conceptions of power in the academic literature are varied, with Foucault's (1981) 'Panoptican' a frequently cited theory of organisational power, discharged through a disciplinary gaze which illuminates 'subjects'. Foucault suggests this illumination means that the labour processes can be clearly codified and categorised. However my research does not support such a notion in the context of the academic labour process, which, despite the arguable existence of more intensive controls and metrics, remains opaque. As outlined above, many participants that I interviewed lamented managerial inaction and the frustration that this caused. Foucault further suggests that power can be seen when it is exercised and it is argued that elements of performance management can lead to domination or control (Townley, 1993). In contrast, the managerial inaction or reluctance that I found throughout this research points to a lack of power, or at least

evidence of the discharging of power. The suggestion from Zuboff (1988) that the appraisal is akin to the 'information panopticon' seems problematic in an academic context. Managerial respondents suggested that they had limited information by which to make decisions, and there was a shared suggestion that senior managers did not provide support for tackling problems. If power is seen in action, as Foucault suggests, managerial inaction appears to suggest a lack of power within the case study institutions.

This is perhaps underpinned by the relatively flat organisational structures within HE institutions, and issues of autonomy, through which power is inevitably dispersed. A concern to maintain academic cultures of collegiality also meant that individual autonomy was not challenged and that performance was not closely monitored, let alone tackled. Alvesson and Spicer's (2016) contemporary analysis of managerialism locates power as residing with Deans and the professoriate. In the context of my research such a suggestion is intriguing. Whilst Deans were not identified specifically by respondents, there was a sense that senior management were not discharging power in a meaningful way, particularly for issues of under-performance. Instead it appeared that significant power resided with Professors. The evidence suggested that tackling poor professorial performance was problematic due to the organisational status they enjoyed. Macfarlane, (2011) explains that academic status and identity is closely related to research and scholarly activities. For example, Professors may be afforded greater organisational status than the very people whom are charged with monitoring and managing their performance. This is clearly problematic for the effective management of performance for a number of reasons, firstly the literature explains that those who enjoy higher social capital experience benefits associated with their reputation, and freedom that they are afforded (Lippuner, 2012 cited in Kapferer,

*et al.*, 2014). Whilst freedom and autonomy are taken-for-granted expectations for senior academics, it is the discord between freedom and responsibility (or professionalism) that is potentially problematic in the context of performance management. Furthermore, and most troubling for appraisers, Thompson and McHugh (2009) suggest that legitimacy is obtained through the consent and acceptance of those who are being “managed”. The extent to which senior managers would truly accept and consent to performance management is likely to be variable.

I found a number of examples where appraisers had to make judgements on staff who enjoyed greater status. Such a finding is almost unique to the academic setting, and this has clear implications for the management of performance. The prevailing performance management literature makes a number of assumptions around managerial authority and commentary on the devolution of HR practices presupposes that line managers have the status and power they need to manage people. But my research rejects a Weberian orthodoxy that assumes that managerial authority is achieved and legitimised through organisational hierarchy and that power can be exercised by managers by employing various resources to impose discipline (Goldthorpe and Hope, 1974). Instead, it suggests that academic managers often lack the authority to manage performance effectively, and that authority, traditionally attained through a hierarchical position, is not achieved within flatter organisational structures or where the position of the line manager is contested.

I found that managers that had to appraise Professors whom were in reality more senior, inevitably avoided discussions around performance, in part because they knew that their judgements had no legitimacy and any consequent decisions could not be enforced. Furthermore, they knew that senior management would not become involved in such situations, such was the status of professors within the organisation;

this was most evident at Westville but was also present in findings from Robbins. The depiction of academic managers in the extant literature describes established orders of power and authority (Cassidy, 1998; Lafferty and Fleming, 2000) yet in both institutions these appeared to be far more prone to contestation and often entirely undermined performance management processes as a consequence. Therefore, issues of status and an absence of legitimate authority fundamentally shaped performance discussions, often rendering them meaningless. At Mortown, there appeared to be more semblance of managerial order, and whilst this meant that authority was less likely to be challenged by lecturing staff, there was still an identification of problems with the appraisal of associate professors.

The relationship between appraiser and appraisee was often different to that of manager and employee in more traditional environments. In academic settings, this more nuanced relationship was problematic. A number of authors argue that relationships with line managers are key for discretionary effort and for improved performance (see Hutchinson and Purcell, 2007). In the context of higher education there was little evidence of this. The academic environment attracts staff who value notions of self-management, professional sovereignty and autonomy (Egginton, 2010; Winter, 2009). I found that, in this context, managers were often unable to levy discretionary effort, particularly as they felt that they had limited authority to either reward good performance or to challenge underperformance. In fact such was the apathy of some managers that they did not see employee engagement as part of their responsibilities.

The matrix structures in place at both Westville and Robbins, without explicit lines of authority, presented challenges (Rees and Porter, 2004). Managers explained that they often did not have a holistic view of employee performance, which again is

counter to the prescriptive performance management literature. Employees also felt that the appraiser did not have a full understanding of their role or of their workload, as they had different lines of reporting for different areas of academic work. This not only presented clear opportunities for underperformance to go unnoticed, but it also provided an environment where important issues around excessive employee workload and health and wellbeing could be missed or simply that managers would feel powerless to take necessary action

The structure, and complex nature of academic work presents a challenging terrain in which to manage performance. This is compounded further by the value placed on academic autonomy. Some respondents felt that this been eroded in some areas, yet others, often those in more junior positions argued that autonomy was sometimes misused (particularly by high status individuals) and could create an environment in which underperformance could go unchecked. For some respondents, autonomy could actually be a veil for unprofessionalism. There was a sense that lecturers and senior lecturers, those staff who do not enjoy the organisational status of Professors, would perhaps be more likely to encounter scrutiny of performance, and that managers, both front line, and senior, would be more prepared to address issues with those actors, than they would be with Professorial staff.

The organisational culture in academic settings is one which relies on shared notions of collegiality, yet paradoxically the sector continues to be driven by a series of metrics and increased competition. This in turn has led to a greater sense of managerialism in the sector, according to some commentators (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016, Deem and Brehony, 2005). However, while this may be reflected in the form of process and policy, there was limited evidence of this in the reality of performance management. Whilst there was a suggestion that collegiate relationships had been compromised, it

could be argued that that collegiate approaches continued to trump managerialism. But, in my view, particularly at Westville, this was driven by managerial reluctance and conflict avoidance in a context in which status shapes personal and professional relationships, rather than by a principled defence of collegiality.

### **8.3 How does performance management shape perceptions of conflict, bullying and harassment?**

This research question initially sought to identify if the management of performance might lead to conflict. Whilst there was some evidence of this, it was actually the absence of consistent and meaningful performance management which led to conflict, in its varying forms. This was particularly acute within the primary case study of Westville, but was also replicated at Mortown and Robbins. Whilst this conflict rarely resulted in inter-personal conflict, there was clear evidence of discontent and perceptions of unfairness. This reflects Purcell's (2014) claim that issues which are often framed at an organisational level as disengagement, are in fact issues of conflict, although they are not recognised as such. Most accounts of performance management point to conflict and resistance arising from the negative consequences for those staff whose performance is managed (Newton and Findley, 1996 and Taylor, 2013), and in academic contexts the erosion of autonomy (Decramer *et al.*, 2012). However, my research identified that the main source of discontent surrounded what staff perceived to be unfair and unequal treatment and by the reluctance of managers to tackle issues effectively. This was particularly acute when staff thought that their colleagues were underperforming, with no action taken; indeed, there was a sense that underperformers were often rewarded with lighter workloads, and that the "reward" for high performers was more work. The fact that staff, in a setting renowned for self-management, recognised the need for greater performance management was



unexpected. It is important here to recognise the continuum that exists within the performance management discourse. Whilst there was no sense from management or employees that micro-management or tight control was welcome, for many managed academics the current absence of clear performance indicators and effective action to address poor performance was problematic. This in turn had implications for motivation, whereby high levels of intrinsic motivation were threatened by the (mis)management of performance and a consequent sense of organisational injustice and negative relationships with line management.

The reluctance of managers to address issues at an early point had clear implications in relation to conflict. Avoiding issues and hoping that they would “blow over” was often cited by respondents as a recognised managerial response to performance concerns. Allowing issues to fester clearly caused frustration for staff, despite the apparently individualised role of academics. It was clear that in spite of this that academics could (accurately or not) identify underperformance in others. Managerial inaction, often as a means of conflict avoidance was found to affect levels of engagement and collaboration, vital in developing and sustaining a collegiate culture. Avgar (2010) explains that conflict avoidance negatively impacts the generation of social capital, co-operation between staff and effective organisational performance. This research presented a compelling argument in support of such findings. At Westville, a further reason why managers avoided difficult performance conversations was an apparent tendency of HR to recommend the implementation of formal processes at an early point, whilst at Robbins it was reported that advice to managers was usually limited to that of policy and procedure. This reflects what Saundry and Wibberley (2014) have referred to as the ‘resolution gap’ whereby centralised models

of HR and the devolution of responsibility for conflict resolution to line managers erodes social processes of resolution and encourages a reliance on formal procedure.

A root cause of conflict was the inconsistent application of performance management processes. The ambiguity around target setting and review and the opaque nature of the academic labour process meant that a number of performance discussions were based on subjectivity and anecdotal evidence. When managers did attempt to address performance, they were often in a precarious position due to a lack of hard evidence. Whilst commentators (see Dominelli and Hoogvelt 1996; Deem and Brehony, 2005) describe the vast array of metrics that have permeated the higher education sector, the consensus among the respondents that I interviewed was that it was still incredibly difficult to accurately measure performance. Therefore rather than solidifying control over the labour process, this opacity provides a rationale and justification for continuing managerial reluctance (Broadbent, 2007b). Whether this also reflects a broader resistance to implementing managerialist constructs remains questionable. There was also little evidence of internal performance metrics being constantly monitored, evaluated and action plans being developed (Broad and Goddard, 2012).

Given the discussion so far, and the general theme of laissez-faire management, it is perhaps unsurprising that there was little evidence of overt bullying as a consequence of performance management, with one or two exceptions, as challenging conversations that might lead to such instances (or accusations) were rare. Having said that, some respondents suggested that they had witnessed or experienced bullying, or that they could easily imagine scenarios where this might take place. It is important to recognise that the notion of bullying is highly subjective and that applying the bullying label is troublesome. Crawford (1998) suggests that the lay term bullying

can be used in many situations to describe a variety of behaviours. However, despite the caution that needs to be applied, I am confident that some of the narratives captured did describe episodes which could be legitimately framed as bullying. Where these centred around performance, there was often a sense that issues of favouritism and in group/out group differentiation were underlying causes. The research findings have presented a number of issues relating to performance ambiguity, and in the context of bullying, this is particularly troublesome, as in the absence of clear objective data, is a space for subjectivity, bias and favouritism, all issues which present a space for potential bullying behaviour.

However, the most frequent examples of bullying, involved the notion of upwards bullying. This is not a new phenomenon; indeed Lewis (2006) explains that managers feel increasingly vulnerable to spurious claims of bullying from staff unwilling to accept performance targets. Retaliatory grievances and complaints and accusations of bullying ultimately lead to managers being bullied. Opportunities for such behaviour clearly reside in a setting in which managerial legitimacy and authority has been found to be nuanced at best, and rejected at worst and where ambiguity over measuring performance allows space for subjective decision making. Respondents from HR described a number of instances in which upward bullying was used as a means of shifting blame and avoiding performance management or disciplinary processes. Prowse and Prowse (2010b) suggest that the existing literature does little to report on issues of employee resistance to attempts to manage performance. This research therefore presents a clear picture as to more pronounced resistance tactics that might be employed. Such approaches compounded issues of managerial reluctance to address issues, as newer or weaker managers immediately wanted to halt proceedings. There was evidence that, whilst managers had to explain and defend

their actions, that accusers, who made rather unsubstantiated claims to try to impede formal processes, went unpunished. There was therefore a sense that organisations did not deal with false accusations firmly, and in failing to do so they inadvertently colluded with the accuser (Lewis, 2006). Perhaps the lack of consequence for those making unsubstantiated accusations is another example of the risk averse approach previously described.

The findings generally found little evidence of the widely accepted picture of performance management being used as a blunt tool to increase control over, and intensify the academic labour process. Instead they pointed to the ineffectiveness of performance management creating inequity in workload and a sense of unfairness and inconsistency in approach. There was a tangible sense of dissatisfaction and of conflict bubbling under the surface, perhaps not serious enough to lead to disciplinary or grievance proceedings, but sufficient to have a detrimental impact on the working environment.

#### **8.4 Can performance management strategies be tailored to reflect notions of collegiality and autonomy?**

The context of the question has evolved during this research, and was initially considered given the number of authors who had attested to the cherished ideals of autonomy and collegiality within the sector (Egginton, 2010 and Winter, 2009), and the sense that managerialist approaches should be viewed with caution (Decramer *et al.*, 2012; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Taylor, 2013). Whilst notions of autonomy and collegiality remain highly valued, my research suggests that generally they are no longer idealised in the same way as the literature would suggest. There was a general acceptance that the current approach to performance management was flawed, yet a degree of uncertainty in terms of how things could be improved. This is perhaps

unsurprising given the range of complexities that this research has uncovered. There was a sense from many respondents that in the context of performance management, absolute autonomy was neither realistic nor desirable and that efforts to maintain collegiality should not lead to a lack of challenge to those perceived as under-performing. In fact, it could be argued that a failure to manage performance in an effective and consistent way was itself a significant threat to sustaining a collegiate culture. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise here that the research was conducted in three post-92 institutions and to be aware that the picture might be different amongst Russell group universities.

A primary concern in relation to the performance management systems explored by my research was the absence of reward for good performance. This was a frustration for a number of managers, and to some extent returns to a theme of a lack of authority needed to conduct meaningful appraisals; it also points to a lack of consideration of recognition and reward within the design of such systems. It is the intention at Westville to tie the performance rating to some form of reward eventually, and yet the rating issue was highly contested. There was a feeling that the emphasis placed on research publications within ratings damaged cultures of collegiality. It was suggested by some respondents that the selfish, individualized pursuit of publications as a means for career advancement meant that staff would not volunteer or assist with other activities and work in a cohesive manner. The measurement of research activity was not only viewed as easier than measuring teaching, but seemed to have far greater value, particularly at Westville, despite the introduction of (and Westville's comparatively poor performance in) the TEF.

Respondents (with the exception of the HR respondents) identified that they were not involved in the design of the performance management systems. There was also a

sense that some managers and managed academics were unclear about the nature and purpose of performance appraisals and viewed the rating element (at Westville) with some suspicion. A lack of involvement in the design of performance management is not a new phenomenon, however, given the complex nature of academic labour, the nuanced and contested role of academic managers, and the difficulty in constructing holistic accounts of performance due to the matrix structures in HE, providing academics with a voice in the development of performance management processes seems vital (De Waal, 2003; Karuhanga, 2010). This point cannot be understated. The academic environment is a highly politicised (Townley, 1993) and often egotistical one. The lack of involvement in system design and lack of clarity in purpose could easily antagonise an employee populace containing free thinkers and dissenting voices. Consequently, involving staff in a meaningful way and having clarity of purpose would appear to be of paramount importance. To that end, there were a number of calls for greater involvement from senior management. There was a clear sense that HR were interested in completion of PDR's rather than on qualitative aspects of the discussion. A combination of a lack of senior leader involvement and a perceived lack of interest from HR left many feeling that discussions were to satisfy internal audit (Marr and Creelman, 2011) and lacked any meaning or value.

As outlined above, managerial inaction on poor performance was seen to erode collegiality and bred a sense of frustration which in turn was damaging to a cohesive working environment. Again, respondents were surprising and suggested having clearer, objective measures would be beneficial and posited that this would remove the anecdotal evidence and minimise any perceptions of bias or unfairness. What some academics actually wanted was a system that worked and was robust, meaningful and fair.

When considering this research question initially, the literature suggested that academics were troubled by notions of managerialism (Collini, 2012) and resented practices such as performance appraisal which might threaten their ability to be self-managing professionals (Egginton, 2010). A key objective of this research was therefore to consider what could be done differently in the complex and cultural (Broadbent, 2007) environment of HE. For a number of the participants in the three case-study institutions at least, performance management, underpinned by a more managerialist approach is not the source of angst that the literature might suggest. Several staff wanted more management as a means of securing greater fairness and equity in relation to both performance and workload. Whilst Alvesson and Spicer (2016) describe the gaming academics engage in as a form of acceptance of managerial dictates, my research presented a more genuine recognition amongst many respondents that more management of performance was needed, not just as a means of achieving reward and recognition, but as a means to challenge staff identified as poor performers. What was in evidence was a paradoxical attitude to performance management; nobody wanted a zestful micro-managed approach to the management and measurement of the labour process, the 'Taylorisation' of academic labour (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996), but equally there were calls for more objective measurements, which can surely only be achieved through greater scrutiny and surveillance.

To summarise, my research suggests that the absence of fair and consistent performance management is more threatening to collegiality than the presence of such a process. Managerial inaction led to frustration and a sense that there was no shared agenda and consensus, which Waters (1989) explains as fundamental to notions of collegiality. In the context of a laissez-faire approach to performance management,

there was a sense that high-status individuals enjoyed too much autonomy and that this did not benefit the organisation. Finally, whilst a number of participants felt that the current approach to performance management in their institution lacked value, there was an absence of clarity around the specifics of how systems could be improved. The need to reward good performance, and for managers to have the authority and support to engage in meaningful discussions is a clear starting point, and that greater senior management involvement is required if the management of performance is to be taken seriously.

## **8.5 Chapter Summary**

This discussion chapter is the final phase of Braun and Clarke's (2008) six stage framework of thematic analysis. The discussion has highlighted areas of significant interest from the research and explained clearly how each of the four research questions have been addressed. The discussion has challenged the perceived wisdom that academics reject notions of managerialism, and are suspicious of performance management. It has also highlighted the assumptions that exist in much of the prescriptive literature about managerial authority, highlighting managerial authority as key issue for effective performance management, particularly in the politicised, status-laden HE environment.

The next chapter will summarise the thesis and identify its contribution to knowledge and the implications the findings have for policy and practice. Furthermore, the chapter will consider the limitations of the research and present recommendations for future research.



## **CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

### **9.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis was to consider the approach to performance management in higher education and to assess its impact in a sector with numerous complex challenges. The topic area was of interest, not least due to my own University employment history, but also due to the unique issues that are present within the academic environment. The mainstream literature makes a number of assumptions are made about the management of performance,, and yet HEIs have a number of distinctive features; in particular the emphasis on academic autonomy, a desire to retain collegial cultures and the contested and diffuse nature of managerial authority present a number of barriers for the successful adoption and implementation of performance management processes. Furthermore, the ambiguous academic labour process means that objective performance measurement is extremely problematic.

The findings from this research suggest that, for the cases within this study at least, institutions continue to struggle to derive value from existing performance management processes.

The methodological approach to this research has led to a volume of rich, thick data and a number of compelling, candid stories have been captured which describe the lived experience of the participants. The data has been thoroughly and rigorously analysed and the findings clearly applied to the research questions.

To end this research thesis, this chapter will now present the contributions to knowledge, policy and practice, and highlight the limitations of the study. Finally, I will suggest potential future research within the topic area.

## **9.2 Contribution to Knowledge, Policy and Practice**

My research has advanced the knowledge base in a number of ways. Firstly, the prevailing literature within the performance discourse makes a number of assumptions about status, authority and power which underpin performance management systems. The research counters Foucauldian conceptions of power and challenges Weberian orthodoxy around authority within the HE sector; such notions appear troublesome to apply in academic settings or in organisations with opaque lines of management and flatter organisational structures. A Foucauldian approach to performance management (and appraisal) encounters numerous challenges and this research has identified that the academic labour process is far from “illuminated”. Instead, despite clear attempts by organisations and the State to develop and impose a wide range of metrics, academic performance remains ambiguous and difficult to measure in any objective way. Furthermore, the opportunity for surveillance through appraisal processes appears to be limited and is constrained by a lack of senior management buy in, and for more junior managers, because of lack of authority, which according to Weber is traditionally achieved through hierarchical positions, as a means of obtaining legitimacy. The flatter organisational structures found in higher education mean that managerial authority is dispersed and diffuse.

From a conceptual perspective this research highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of status in mediating authority and power. Furthermore, while Foucauldian perspectives that foreground notions of self-management are intuitively appealing, they underplay the importance of managerial agency, which this research has shown is of clear significance due to the role of managers in appraisal. Furthermore it has highlighted the potential for managerial discretion and reluctance in enacting disciplinary mechanisms, to shape the way that performance is managed.

The conceptual framework developed within this research helps to explain the complexity of performance management in higher education, and can be used as a guiding principle to challenge existing understandings and assumptions. The framework clearly identifies the pronounced role of status, authority, ambiguity and power. It highlights the potential for status to be levied in a way which obfuscates attempts to measure performance and can potentially lead to perceptions that autonomy, rather than being a space for freedom within an organisational framework, can be abused as a means to legitimise what is in effect a disregard for organisational imperatives, in favour of the pursuit of more individual objectives. Furthermore, it highlights the potential power of senior academics to resist the adverse implications of performance management (Kalfa, et al., 2018). The conceptual framework explains how such actions can play out in practice, because of the recognition that managers often lack the authority to address performance concerns. This recognition is regularly shared between appraiser and appraisee, often resulting in an absence of meaningful discussion around performance and a lack of tangible outcomes from the appraisal. The conceptual framework depicts the problems of Foucauldian conceptions of power, and illustrates the apparent absence of organisational power, given the lack of illumination of the labour process, and apparent lack of meaning given to appraisal constructs. The framework, and the research that followed has clearly described the ambiguity in performance measurement that remains in academia. It is this ambiguity, coupled with a lack of authority that permits status to have such significance within performance discussions. It also provides a space where individuals can strategically cultivate their organisational image, and relationship with senior management, safe in the knowledge that there is little tangible evidence of their performance.

The literature has not sufficiently explored the management of performance in environments where managerial authority is contested and managerial legitimacy is questioned. The nuanced position of managers with devolved responsibility has huge implications for the management of performance. The literature assumes that devolved responsibility is to those with managerial authority. However, this research has highlighted that often managers have devolved responsibility, without authority. As such, this research has identified a gap within the existing knowledge base and adds to the academic debate around the success and appropriateness of performance management systems in higher education. Broad and Goddard (2012) contend that the management of performance in higher education remains under-researched, and this study has clearly contributed to this discussion. The critical performance management literature has rightly focussed the multiple purposes of appraisal, and the various barriers to its successful use (see for example: Chubb *et al.*, 2011, Prowse and Prowse, 2010 and Newton and Findley, 1996). Furthermore, issues of conflict avoidance (Boon, 2009) and managerial competence (underpinned by adequate training and support) are highlighted as casual factors in the ineffective implementation of performance management systems. While my own research provides further empirical weight to these arguments it also suggests that managerial authority is an important antecedent for poor practice and the avoidance of meaningful honest discussions.

Secondly, the progressive marketization of higher education has placed a greater focus on the management of academic performance. This research not only has significant policy implications given the role played by University education in the economic and political life of the UK, but provides a unique contribution to the conceptualisation of performance management. Bennett (2014) describes the

growing practitioner interest in performance management and furthermore considers the potential for conflict in the sector. The existing literature has tended to discuss this conflict in terms of increased managerial control over the labour process and excessive and often unfair management action targeting poor performers. However my research suggests a more nuanced account; certainly the rhetoric of an increasingly metric driven, managerialist approach to performance management was not necessarily reflected in the lived experience of the majority of respondents within the study. Instead, discontent was created by the lack of managerial attention to performance, which created inequities in workload distribution and undermined collegiality. Moreover, this tended to work in the favour of high status individuals. This not only challenges simplistic conceptions of managerialism but also suggests a need for a broader and more sophisticated account of fairness at work and how this relates to the varied perceptions and experiences of workers.

In terms of policy, the research highlights a number of practical complexities that must be resolved if performance management practices are to add significant value to HEIs and its employees. The matrix structures present within Universities developed during a period where *management* was a less than central tenet, appear to be problematic for capturing holistic accounts of employee performance. Important aspects of employee performance are therefore entirely missed, or are assessed on the basis of largely anecdotal evidence and consequently prone to bias and subjectivity. Moreover, good performance is often left unrecognised. It is perhaps not surprising that performance management processes often fall into disrepute, with performance discussions often avoided and appraisal processes seen as meaningless by both managers and managed.

A key problem in HEIs is managerial authority. This research has identified that a lack of authority effects managerial behaviour and has a significant impact on the extent to which those being appraised view the process. For performance management principles to be applied fairly and consistently, they should be carried out by those whom have the authority to do so. Whilst adopting a more traditional hierarchical structure might appear counter cultural, this research has highlighted on numerous occasions that an absence of performance management is a huge source of frustration, and that often this avoidance is a consequence of reluctant managers. Managers are reluctant not only due to their contested authority but due to a lack of support from senior management. For performance management concepts to be applied properly in an academic setting, senior management need to be far more engaged in the process, and prepared to support managers prepared to have challenging conversations.

Issues of management within this research were not limited to concerns around managerial authority. The study identified that a number of managers had been promoted to such positions without having to evidence managerial competence or having had any significant managerial experience. Whilst this is not a new phenomenon, the complexity of management within an academic context presents a range of obstacles. A clear consideration for HEI's given the competitive HE environment is that of managerial competence, throughout the organisation. The role and nature of management within an academic setting has begun, and inevitably will continue to shift, and whilst this research suggested that some laissez-faire approaches still appear to be tolerated, the direction of travel will surely lead to more scrutiny and management challenges.

The implications for HR practitioners and senior leaders are clear. Managers must have authority to discharge their people management responsibility but also the importance of managerial competence and the ability to have high quality conversations with academic staff needs to be recognised. This in turn requires that alongside academic achievement, managerial excellence must be a pivotal factor in promotion decisions. Furthermore, managers must be given the training, development and ongoing support to manage order for PMS to work effectively. In addition, HEIs need to accept that academic work is complex and look for more cohesive systems of evaluation and feedback that can capture the full gamut of the academic role.

### **9.3 Limitations**

This research and the subsequent findings have been constrained by three primary shortcomings.

Firstly, the use of a case study approach means that findings from the research can only account for the experience of the actors within the case study environment(s), and claims for sector wide implications cannot be made. However, as a qualitative piece of research, generalisability to wider population is not the goal of the thesis, which instead focusses on improving understanding of the phenomena under investigation, and providing a tentative hypothesis for further research. Furthermore, by exploring issues across three institutions the validity of the research is enhanced (Yin, 2014).

Similarly, the sample size within the case study sites means that the subjective accounts provided from participants are not intended to be representative of the wider employee constituent within the institution(s). The research has been particularly limited in terms of accessibility to a wider number of participants. The research could

have been enhanced if discussions with both managers and their direct reports were possible, as considering these accounts could have both increased the validity of the research and allowed the researcher to probe specific areas of interest. As the sole researcher, issues around time for, and the cost of, further research prevented access to a wider number of employees which might have further enhanced the . A degree of pragmatism was required in this regard, as key themes and patterns began to appear frequently during discussions, and a balance of managed academics and academic managers was achieved, albeit within different reporting lines. The use of triangulation was used to substantiate the research findings from a range of participants in varying roles and faculty's in order to provide a more rounded picture of issues within the institution. Accessibility was also an issue as despite numerous approaches to prospective candidates, further participants did not emerge. However, following the intensive approach to data analysis I am assured that data saturation was achieved in spite of the aforementioned issues. New information did not present itself towards the end of the research and there was instead replication within the stories told (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

Finally, as an insider researcher, I cannot discount the potential for participants to withhold information, or provide one-sided accounts of their experience. This is an inherent issue within the interview method but one that the researcher feels fairly assured about, given the candid nature of the interviews, which can be clearly evidenced within the transcripts.

Despite these limitations, the insights gleaned from this research can provide a tentative hypothesis for future research and as such advance the knowledge base. The extent to which the issues presented within the theses are prevalent within the sector might then be considered. Furthermore, the in-depth descriptions presented



within the research allow the audience to draw comparisons with their own environment and consider whether the findings have transferability to other contexts.

#### **9.4 Suggestions for future research**

This research has provided a tentative hypothesis in relation to the multiple causes of poor performance management practice in academia and furthermore offered some insights into ways in which such systems might be improved.

The limitations section of this thesis outline a number of shortcomings, which further research might seek to remedy, before a substantive hypothesis can be offered. To that end, further research involving a wider number of participants and institutions could illuminate and inform the discussion further, and help to ascertain whether the issues within this research are repeated elsewhere. At this point, descriptions and inferences could be located at a sectoral level, rather than the institutional level, which this research has informed.

Furthermore, this research has involved participants from HR, from the Trade Union and an array of 'academic managers' and 'managed academics'. The managerial representatives tend to have been akin to front line managers, and the research has suggested that a number of the antecedents of poor performance management practice relates to the attitude and behaviour of more senior managers. Therefore, further research could encapsulate the perceptions of senior leaders within the organisation.

Finally, this research has argued that a number of the issues around the successful management of performance, relate to the uncomfortable meshing of notions of status, autonomy, and ambiguity, coupled with a lack of managerial authority, within flatter

organisational structures. Research into areas of the health service, which might identify with these organisational characteristics, could be useful. Such research would deepen the conceptualisation of performance management in such settings.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A – Description of Study**

You are invited to take part in a research project to contribute to the completion of a PhD Thesis. Before you agree to take part in the study, please take time to read the following information. If you have any questions about this research you can contact me via email [andy.brown@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:andy.brown@plymouth.ac.uk)

#### **1. Who will conduct the study?**

The study will be carried out by Andy Brown from Plymouth University.

#### **2. What is the purpose of the study?**

The study's main purpose is to examine the impact of performance management practices on employees within the higher education sector. Your views will be compared and contrasted with that of other stakeholders with a view to building a picture of the effect of such practices.

#### **3. What happens?**

If you are interested in taking part in this study, you will be asked to take part in an in-depth interview. You will be asked a series of questions on the subject of performance management. Your permission will be required for the interview to be recorded (audio only), transcribed and used as primary research evidence for the PhD thesis.

#### **4. Confidentiality**

Everything you tell the researcher during this meeting will remain confidential between you and the researcher. Anonymity at the individual and organizational level is assured. Data will be held under strict data protection protocols. While quotations from your interview may be used in reporting the research, these will be carefully anonymized and any identifiers will be removed. The supervisory team are unaware of who is taking part in the interview.

#### **5. How will the study be used?**

Your input will provide primary research into the use of performance management in Higher Education. The study will be used to support the completion of a PhD thesis on this subject. The data may also be used in the development and publication of articles in academic and practitioner journals.

#### **6. Do I have to take part?**

No, participation is entirely voluntary. At the start of the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you change your mind about participation, you can leave the interview at any time without any questions being asked about your decision.

**7. What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

You will be asked to take part in a semi structured interview about your experience of the use of performance management, and the effect these processes have on your working life

**8. How long will the interview take?**

The interview is expected to last between 45 - 60 minutes.

**9. Will the outcome of the study be published?**

The outcomes will be published in a report, towards the completion of a PhD theses and there is scope for parts of the research to be published in an academic journal. However, you can be assured that any information you provide will be completely anonymous and you reserve the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

## **Appendix B - Topic Guides**

### **Topic Guide One: Academic Managers**

- Role in the organisation and length of service (possible probe as to nature of organisation if necessary)
- Previous knowledge and understanding of Performance Management
- Previous attitudes (if any) to performance management
- Approach to performance management (adherence to policy and process, use of KPI's)
- Personalising individual KPI's,? (when the outputs are often the result of combined efforts, i.e. NSS, retention, recruitment, or perhaps out of the hands of the individual)
- Competence/Confidence/Training in Management Role
- What competencies do you think you displayed that led you to being given a people management role?
- To what extent do you think performance management practices impact on your relationship with your staff?
- What support to you receive from senior managers when implementing performance management practices?
- How does the structure and the more nuanced managerial position impact on your ability to carry out performance appraisal and PM activities.
- Extent to which performance management has led to conflict or bullying accusations
- How could performance management be delivered differently to reflect notions of collegiality and autonomy?

## **Topic Guide Two: Managed Academics**

- Role in the organisation and length of service (possible probe as to nature of organisation if necessary)
- Previous knowledge and understanding of Performance Management
- Previous attitudes (if any) to performance management
- What exposure have you had to performance management?
- Perceptions of fairness in relation to the management and measurement of performance?
- Extent to which meaningful discussions are had about performance at appraisals
- Impact of PM on relationship with line manager
- What evidence is used to assess performance?
- Do you have individual responsibility for all of the objectives that you are set?
- (Perceptions of) How reasonable are performance targets?
- (Perceptions of) How reasonable is your workload?
- Autonomy – has this changed and if so how?
- (Any potential) Exposure to issues of conflict or bullying as a consequence of performance management? If so, explain the nature and impact.
- How could performance management be delivered differently to reflect notions of collegiality and autonomy?

### **Topic Guide Three: Human Resources**

- Role in the organisation and length of service (possible probe as to nature of organisation if necessary)
- Previous knowledge and understanding of Performance Management
- Previous attitudes (if any) to performance management
- What information do HR capture from the performance management system?
- Why are objectives not captured? Do senior management capture this information or the more qualitative aspects?
- Is anything done in the event of a low “score” at appraisal?
- What were the key considerations in designing the PMS system? Is the context of HE considered? “one-size fits all”
- What do you feel impedes the success of the system?
- To what extent do you feel the system is perceived as valuable?
- What changes would you make?
- What about managerial competence and confidence?
- Do you feel there are sufficient metrics in place to adequately evaluate performance?
- To what extent have issues around conflict and bullying arisen as a result of PM?
- What do you attribute this to (manager, unreasonable workload, expectations, employee attitude/behaviour competence for example?)
- How are such issues addressed?

## **Topic Guide Four: Trade Union Representative**

- Role in the organisation and length of service (possible probe as to nature of organisation if necessary)
- Previous knowledge and understanding of Performance Management
- Previous attitudes (if any) to performance management
- How would you describe the approach to PM at this institution?
- What reports have you had from members around their experience of performance management?
- How do you find issues of culture and structure impact upon the performance management of academic staff?
- To what extent do members report issues around conflict and bullying which has arisen from PM (work intensification, reduced autonomy, unfair system/measurement)
- What do you attribute this to (manager, unreasonable workload, expectations, employee attitude/behaviour competence for example?)
- What are the managerial responses to such issues?
- At what point do unions intervene in such issues?
- How else would you like to see such matters resolved?

## Appendix C - Participant Consent Form

	<b>Please initial each box</b>
I confirm that I have read the information sheet about the research project provided by the researcher	
I confirm that I understand what the study concerns and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study	
I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason	
I agree that the interview can be recorded and transcribed.	
I understand that the researchers will keep this information secure and confidential.	
I understand that the researcher, and only the researcher, will be aware of the identity of those being interviewed. The research supervision team are unaware of the individuals who take part in the research.	
I understand that the anonymised interview transcript may in the future be used for reporting and publishing the findings of the research.	
I understand that I will not be named or identified in any way in any report or publication arising from this research.	

<b>Name of person interviewed</b>	Signature	Date
<b>Name of researcher</b>	Signature	Date